

Leaving the Playpen: What Limpy Lower Taught Me about Canada

A Pre-Election Reflection

By Kevin D. Annett



A reporter asked me today why as a proponent of a Republic I am running *from* rather than *for* Canadian public office. I told him this story.

Her name was Julie Selman. One soggy Vancouver morning after our Grade Nine math class she approached me and asked if I'd give her upcoming nomination speech. It seems she had decided to run for student council president.

"You're good with words" she explained.

Far be it from me, at age fifteen or sixty three, to shy away from a microphone. Nevertheless, I hesitated before her entreaty, which wasn't surprising, considering what I thought of our high school student council and the doddering Vice Principal, Mr. Lower, who held sway over it. But then I surprised myself and perhaps Julie by saying yes.

After all, I realized, I'd get to address the entire student body.

The breathtaking day arrived. Over three hundred of my fellow students crammed the school auditorium with the usual contrived electioneering euphoria, sporting placards and chanting the names of their chosen candidates for the esteemed playpen office. Julie and I were seated with two other candidates and their minions up on the stage where the previous year I had flubbed my lines in our pitiable production of *As You Like It*. But those had been someone else's words. The script I would recite today was my own.

I bore a definite smirk when my time came and I strode up to the podium. The young crowd and their ever-present clutch of supervising teachers sensed that something was afoot. The Vice Principal, old "Limpy" Lower, was frowning from the back of the hall even before I spoke. My words were brief and struck right at the heart of the matter.

"I was asked to speak today on behalf of Julie Selman and tell you why she'd make a good student council President" I began, making a point of putting aside my prepared notes.

"Julie's a great person. If we actually had an honest system of student government in this school there'd be no better person to head it up. But the point is, we don't. Our student council is run by Mr. Lower, who has veto power over anything we decide. It's really just a puppet body. So it doesn't matter who we elect today, they'll all be controlled by the school administration. Is that what we call democracy?"

At that point, my microphone was turned off. Limpy Lower was doing his best to hobble towards the stage accompanied by the reigning student council president, an insipid nebbish named Dave Pearson. Limpy ordered me to the office. Dave seized the mike. And that was that.

The rumor was that Limpy Lower had won his handicap and nickname from a German bullet at the Battle of the Somme. Apparently he was something of a Canadian historian - the approved kind, naturally - and as both scholar and former

grunt the guy berated me for about an hour as if I was a Hun prisoner of war in need of enlightenment on the virtues of what he kept calling "representative democracy".

"How do you mean? Like, you represent all of us?" I asked him. That just pissed him off even more.

I wasn't expelled for my speech that day, although my parents were issued a stern letter from the school administration concerning their son's "irresponsible" antics. My Dad laughed it off and even congratulated me, while Mom gave her own version of a Limpy Lower speech. Regardless, I was suddenly on a definite probation at University Hill Secondary School. As I would experience so often over subsequent decades, I became someone to be watched and avoided. Even my old friends began keeping their distance, and teachers frowned at me whenever I passed by. Well, all the world's a frigging stage, Kev, I said to myself, and so I proceeded to move on to Act Two. I issued a leaflet.

The days that followed were a lot like the time that a bunch of wild Indians and I started peacefully occupying genocidal churches on Sunday mornings: in the words of one of my fellow occupiers, "Like we're standing on a pile of dynamite holding a match". A tense, horrified excitement hung over our school after the fifty copies of my epistle made the rounds. And small wonder.

"This school system tells us we're to become mature and responsible citizens of a democracy, but they deny us freedom every day. How can we practice democracy when we're nineteen if we're denied it at eighteen? Mr. Lower has no place on our student council! We need a student-run body. Until we get that we should all boycott student council elections and refuse to pay student council fees!"

I didn't sign my manifesto, but hell, everybody knew who'd written it. And being so bold, I began to gain supporters. Kids started asking for copies of the leaflet. Somebody graffitied the walls with "Power to the People" slogans. I soon issued other leaflets - under the provocative title of "Inside the Factory" - that called on

the students and teachers to convene a weekly assembly to make all the school decisions. I was calling for revolution and the powers that were knew it.

The upshot of this, my first sojourn into politics, was unexpected. The school administration buckled. The following year, the student council won its independence and a student assembly was formed at which anyone could speak and vote. Old Limpy Lower was retired and a crop of more progressive teachers brought in. The curriculum became freer and more student directed. And soon, I was asked to sit on a new "Consultative Committee" to help run the school. For as US President Lyndon Johnson once advised all rulers desiring to co-opt dissent,

"Better to have `em inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in."

Nothing much changes: especially in Canada, where the playpen prevails. Limpy Lower still sits at the head of the arrangement called the government in the person of the Governor General, the unelected "representative" of a foreign power who can veto and disband any government, and pass any "Order in Council" law without our knowledge or consent. And like dutifully subordinate student council members, Canadian Members of Parliament must all swear true allegiance to one person, a foreigner calling herself a queen, rather than to a Constitution or to We the People.

Coming of age is always a painful process: especially when you're the first one to declare that the Emperor truly is naked. But nearly a half century after I helped overturn University Hill Secondary School, I've learned once more that a limping, corrupt and obsolete system can be brought down more easily than we realize. And over half of Canadians agree with me, when it comes to creating a Republic in Canada.

So learn the hard won lessons, boy and girls. Don't pay those "student council fees" called federal taxes, or vote in the elections to their hand puppet parliament. Walk away from their system and make something new, free and real that you yourselves control. And then watch what happens: the old oppressors will have to limp right along after you to catch up.

Run for office, in this country? Shit, I can carve a better political system out of a banana. And shall.

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