

Laurence Stott

Education for democracy

The smarter we get, the less patience we have for things that happen slowly. In this way education often seems to work against a grasp of the way things actually happen, in human affairs especially, and the prospect for wisdom fades as the horizons of the intellect expand to take in alluring possibilities that lie beyond present realities. As we surely ought to have learned from our own lifetimes, a practical democracy has its fragilities, and neglect can kill it. More deadly yet, as Stott points out, we lavish on it in schools sentiment that has no nourishment and praise based on serious misunderstandings. Before we know it the next self respecting generation will turn in disgust and ignorance to something much worse, unless we get serious about teaching the real merits of the system we have inherited.

Most countries don't give a second thought about using the schools to engender in the young respect for their own particular social system. Not only are we reluctant to do this in Canada, we actually undermine respect for our political system by holding up for appreciation a false view of that system, a fairy tale view. Just as John is a bit hurt when he learns that Santa Claus is really just grumpy Dad, so young people are hurt when they find our way of life to be harsher than the fairy story portrayed. The student rebellions of the 60's, and now the current cynicism among students, are products, I believe, of this moving from fairy tale to reality. But Canadian democracy as we know it, as it actually is, is worthy of respect and appreciation, and we have no reason to be bashful about using the schools to engender such respect.

By "democracy" I mean parliamentary government as we know it (laws and policy decisions made by a majority of elected

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representatives; elections by secret ballot every five years), and liberties as we know them (subject to law, freedom of assembly, speech, religion, media; freedom to dissent). I believe that the schools do little to engender in our young people respect for this democracy, and that they should be doing much more in this regard.

I believe there are three main reasons why we do so little to engender this respect. Firstly, "engender respect" smacks of indoctrination, which latter is deemed, correctly I think, to be anti-democratic, to be totalitarian. In short, some hold that it is not democratic to engender respect for democracy. Secondly, many greatly respect 'true' (or 'real' or 'genuine') democracy, but are very unhappy with the democracy we actually have, judging it to be little more than a sham version of the real thing. Lastly, some believe that respect for democracy in schools will militate against teachers taking a strong leadership stance and against the attainment of high standards: teachers would be unwilling, it is feared, to be demanding, since a demanding leader is held to be authoritarian (and non-democratic) and would teach to the average ability level, or the lowest, lest the schools become elitist (and non-democratic). All three reasons are flawed. Furthermore, the errors are pernicious, not benign.

Democracy is not a doctrine. It makes no truth claims, neither does it make moral claims, thus standing in stark contrast with religions and ideologies. Democracy is essentially an amoral decision-making process. It can throw up any decision, be it deemed moral or immoral, be it based on truth or falsity. Indeed, inasmuch as moral notions are neither justified nor discredited by majority vote (rape would not be rendered moral by receiving majority approval), it is not surprising that democracy and morality live in a tense stand-off. Democracy does not claim that the majority is right, only that decisions have to be made and that, given respect for individual freedom of thought and expression, democracy is the best way (most open-to-change) of arriving at those decisions.

Furthermore, democracy can be rationally defended - that is, it does not need to be inculcated. Our democracy is the deliberate refusal to put too much power in too few hands for too long, which is to say it has a well-founded fear of oppression by those in power. At the same time, this democracy recognizes the need for a law-making, policy-making, effective government, which is to say it has a well-founded fear of anarchy. Democracy allows hard decisions to be made in the face of opposition without suppressing opposition; it allows social stability along with the continuous possibility of change; it accomplishes changes in power without a tank in sight; and it embraces universal education since it has already decided to accept dissent, not suppress it. Moreover, history has shown that this democracy works; it is not merely a utopian dream. For a society which chooses not to repress minority groups or freedom of thought

in general, thus acknowledging and expecting conflicts in value, democracy is clearly the best way of governing.

Thus to engender respect for democracy as we know it is not to indoctrinate. Democracy is not a doctrine, and respect will be born of citing good reasons for such respect.

A hoax

To those who respect 'true' democracy but are horrified by the democracy we have, I must say that defining democracy in terms of equality, brotherhood, and freedom (which is how such people usually do define it) is nothing but a cruel hoax.

Our democracy has always been hard-headed about the need for effective government, that is, about the need for some people to be in power over others; and that is to say that there will not be equality of power. Democracy is to a high degree the tyranny of the majority. What little equality there is, is generated by the freedoms embraced by our democracy, by the opportunity to assert one's views. Any vision of democracy that eliminates the need for effective government is utopian and perverse; non-government, which is to say anarchy, is not a viable way of social life.

Democracy places its money upon the principle of competition, and hence streams people into winners and losers rather than into brotherhood. Conflict is at the heart of democracy, captured and crystallized in the institution of parliament where political parties struggle for power before a judging populace. In democratic systems of justice the courtroom is an arena of conflict between two lawyers, each struggling for victory, before a judging populace jury. Furthermore, it is no accident that most democracies still cling to a high degree of capitalism, a system wherein producers compete for markets before a buying populace. Any vision of democracy that exalts equality and brotherly love has to deny competition and conflict, and thus falls into the arms of totalitarianism. Far from being "true democracy", such visions sever all connection with democracy.

As for an idealized dream of freedom, no society will willingly let others violently overthrow it. "Absolute freedom" is strictly speaking, and practically speaking, nonsense. Democracy embodies the rule of law, holding law to be our best guarantee of personal liberties. Any vision of democracy that eliminates the rule of law, and hence rails against police and R.C.M.P., falls into the arms of either totalitarianism or anarchy. Either way, individual liberties will suffer loss.

In short, "true democracy" is utopian and non-democratic. The

democracy which we have does work, does sustain large measures of personal freedom, can throw up decisions which will seek to reduce inequalities, does not forbid brotherly love, and mildly supports brotherhood in the sense that democracy forbids lawlessness and believes all should have their say. But democracy is essentially conflict. The freedoms enshrined in democracy live in dynamic tension with the need for law and policy. Freedoms mean conflict, since unoppressed people who have access to education will differ greatly in their beliefs and ambitions. I have said that "true democracy" as the confluence of equality, brotherhood, and freedom is nothing but a cruel hoax, and not something we should foist upon the children in our schools. Yet some notable educators foster such a hoax:

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious. (1)

For anyone who takes democracy seriously, the claims of the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity must all be respected in making practical policies... A theory in which any of these ideals is either given overwhelming significance or virtually ignored can hardly claim to be democratic. It would not simply be a version of democracy, but a different kind of political theory altogether. (2)

The notion that democracy militates against high standards or strong teacher leadership is absurd. Far from being a levelling process, democracy embodies the struggle for supremacy; the spoils go to the capable. And democracy assumes strong leadership inasmuch as it assumes strong government. Democracy is also, however, the attempt to prevent oppression, and hence education should be our best effort at bringing all children to the limits of their potential. This does not mean holding bright students back, nor does it mean weak teachers; it means exactly the opposite. In short, there is nothing within democracy that militates against high standards. Democracy is not anti-intellectual or anti-expert; democracy is not stupid.

Thus there are no good reasons for refraining from engendering in our young people respect for democracy as we know it. Moreover, democracy does merit appreciation. Because we have strong government we bask in the benefits of social order; we do not fear to walk the streets. Changes in power within our society occur without a drop of blood spilt. We enjoy freedom of thought, of assembly, of faith; our children have access to self-development through the public education system; we have access to information and opinions through non-censored media; and we have freedom to

dissent. There is the continuous possibility of social change, which is to say that there is always the possibility of improvement. If this does not merit appreciation and respect, what does?

In sum, the democracy that we have is the attempt to create a viable way of life that actively supports diversity and dares to flirt with dissent. Because it is not a doctrine and does not claim to be moral, it need not rest its case on indoctrination, but rather can embrace education and stand upon reasons. Rather than rail against its lack of divine perfection, let us appreciate democracy, the real democracy that we do have, as a spectacular human achievement the likes of which may never again be seen in human history. Let us seek to improve the decisions the democratic process makes. Let us teach our children, in the schools, to respect it, messy and conflict-ridden though it be. Mess is the price of freedom.

Rebelling students in the sixties claimed that the only difference between themselves and the adult establishment was that they really believed in the democracy that the elders had held up to them, and what they saw around them was not really democracy. But what they saw around them really was democracy; what they had been taught was a lie, a cruel hoax.

NOTES

1. J.Dewey, "The School and Society" in **Dewey on Education**, Ed. M. Dworkin (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1959) p.49.
2. B. Crittendon, **Education and Social Ideals** (Ontario: Longman Canada Ltd., 1973) p.149.