

Models of true democracy sprouting, especially in South America

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or otherwise—is premature. It begs the perennial question of how we get from here to there.

Other visions are presented elsewhere in this issue. George Mortimore proposes democratizing our constitution via a Romanow-Inquiry-style consultation process. Bill Longstaff makes the case for “direct democracy” based on citizens’ assemblies. And Clive Dayson writes (idealistically) about the need to change from a globalized to a localized economy as a prerequisite to having democracy flourish at all levels.

There is no shortage of proposed alternatives to the horrendously destructive status quo, some more potentially attainable than others, and it is encouraging that so many people are dreaming these dreams. Without the dreams, the effort to escape the nightmares would never gain momentum.

A few of my correspondents take the view that revolution, peaceful or otherwise, springs mainly from desperation, and they argue that not enough people in Canada, or the West in general, are yet desperate enough to storm the corporate Bastille. They think that, when the social justice movement really takes off, it will more likely happen in the Third World countries, where poverty, hunger, and deprivation—mostly inflicted by the IMF, World Bank and WTO on behalf of rich bankers and investors—have inflamed and infuriated most of the populace.

South America, in particular, abounds with people who are not only desperate, but also painfully aware of why and how their misery was caused—and by whom. In the article by Asad Ismi on Venezuela, you’ll read about how its democratically elected president, Hugo Chavez, managed to survive two attempts by the U.S. Bush administration to oust him—first by a failed CIA-plotted coup and then by a strike of some of the oilfield workers fomented by the U.S. and the country’s wealthy élite.

Chavez is viewed as an enemy by Washington because he insists on using Venezuela’s oil revenues to help the poor rather than the big multinational oil companies. He won’t cooperate in imposing the corporate agenda on his

people, so his country could soon be added to Bush’s “axis of evil” list.

As Ismi points out, a key development in the Venezuela story is that so many of its citizens have been enabled to participate in their own governance. Once this process gets under way, it’s going to be very difficult for the neoliberals to reverse it.

Even if the CIA succeeds in assassinating Chavez—a grim possibility given the failed coup attempt—the movement toward real democracy in Venezuela may now be unstoppable.

In Argentina, too, in the wake of the demolition of its economy by Western bankers and the IMF, a strong upsurge in participatory democracy has occurred. Neighbourhood “assemblies” have sprouted up in most cities, and—as Mike Martin tells us in another piece in this issue—many factories bankrupted by the IMF have been taken over and are being successfully run by their employees.

In Brazil, too, a purportedly leftist regime led by a former labour leader, “Lula” da Silva, has come to power. Some doubt remains as to whether, or to what extent, Lula will enact the social and economic reforms he promised in his election campaign, but, even if he breaks faith with the working poor who supported him, Brazil will still show us the participatory budget form of democracy at the municipal level that was pioneered in Porto Alegre and is now practised in many other Brazilian cities.

These breakthroughs have been achieved in defiance of the transnational corporations and their subservient international financial and trade agencies: the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. Most impressively, these exercises in true democracy have succeeded—for now, at least—despite the fierce opposition of the world’s sole superpower. Let’s be clear about the identity of the most powerful supporter of corporate globalization—and hence the strongest opponent of democracy: it’s the United States. Without the economic, political and especially the mili-

tary might of the U.S. behind them, the TNCs would be much less formidable adversaries. When we challenge them, we’re challenging the politicians they’ve bought in Washington, in Canada, and in most other countries; we’re challenging their slick media propagandists; and, most dauntingly, we’re challenging the massive U.S. military apparatus that’s been marshalled to make the world safe for the corporate freebooters.

These are redoubtable foes we’re opposing. But they’re not invulnerable. We have a lot going for us. We have the emerging models of democracy in South America and elsewhere. We have the successful “eco-villages” and other local economies that have been set up around the world, all democratically run and all living proof that trade doesn’t have to be global in scope. We have growing “fair trade,” anti-sweatshop, and organic food movements. Perhaps most crucially, we have a growing worldwide awareness that what we are embarked upon is not just an effort to restore democracy, but nothing less than an effort to preserve human and other life on Earth. Our very first priority, once we are free to govern ourselves, must be to take steps to halt the suicidal corporate ruination of our planet and thus ensure our species’ survival.

This battle is being fought on many fronts, in many places, in many ways, by many different groups. Most of these groups are not politically partisan, except in those countries where a truly populist political movement has emerged that has captured the hopes and trust of the majority. That hasn’t happened yet in Canada. Here, as in most other Western nations, it’s going to take many more years of non-partisan civil society effort to build a strong pro-democracy movement (and further weaken the neoliberal forces arrayed against us).

Until then, it would be naïve to think that democracy is something that can be won in the polling-booth. ☹

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