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canadian student review

Theoretical Strengths and Practical Weaknesses:
The UN's Inability to Uphold and Protect Human Rights

by Brandon Hillis

Seen as the crown jewel of human rights since its creation following World War II, the United Nations is arguably the world's largest and most recognized international organization. With over 160 member states, the UN has a presence in the entire world. However, in recent decades the United Nations has found itself to be the target of much criticism, from citizens of states, to countless academics, to military and political leaders. The strengths of the United Nations, in theory and practice, have come under fire recently, and many believe that the strengths have become overshadowed by glaring weaknesses.

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The United Nations finds much of its strength in its theory. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, created in 1948 and signed by all member states, is arguably the most complete document of human rights in history. The declaration extensively covers first generation civil, political, and legal rights through declaring rights to freedom of assembly, association, belief, religion, property, a right to a nationality, the "right to take part in government," movement rights, and a variety of legal rights to ensure that no one is arbitrarily detained, that everyone has a right to a trial, and that "all are equal before the law" (Orend, 2002, pp. 244-247). Additionally, in an attempt to appease the Soviet Bloc and other left-leaning member states of the UN, the declaration also covers second generation human rights, such as the "right to social security," the right to "a standard of living adequate for… health and well-being," and the right to

"freely participate in the cultural life of the community" (Orend, 2002, pp. 248-249). Unlike many other human rights documents that endorse either first or second generation rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights embraces and supports both generations of rights.

The means of enforcement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also represents a theoretical strength of

> The United Nations finds much of its strength in its theory. But many of its weaknesses and limitations are found in reality and in practice.

the UN. The preamble to the declaration declares that "member states have pledged themselves to achieve… human rights and fundamental freedoms" (Orend, 2002, p. 244). This means that, in theory, when states, be they member states or not, are found in violation of human rights, that the members of the United Nations will rise up to ensure that said violations come to an end. This, of course, is strength in theory only, it will be seen that in reality, the means of enforcement of human rights is a disturbing weakness of the United Nations.

Many of the weaknesses and limitations of the United Nations are found in reality and in practice. From a theoretical perspective, the UN is a strong body, capable of enforcing human rights throughout the world. However, in practice, its enforcement abilities are weak at best. The United Nations only has the power to recommend that action is taken; it relies on its member states to take action. Soldiers, tanks, and supplies all come from member states, and when member states choose not to become involved in a UN mission, the flow of support ceases to exist. A textbook example of this is Rwanda, where UN member states refused to get involved—some even pulled out their forces after the fighting began—resulting in meagre UN involvement that was incapable of enforcing its objectives (Dallaire, 2003). Another example includes Darfur, where thousands of people die every week, yet due to a lack of interest from member states, the UN is unable to get involved (Reeves, 2005, p. 8; and Chavez, 2005, p. 18).

The second weakness related to the UN's enforcement abilities is the anti-democratic nature of the Security Council. Consisting of five permanent members, all with veto powers, and ten rotating members, the Security Council is

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Cheers,
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likely the greatest limitation of the United Nations. Even in a situation where a vast majority of the member states and the Security Council support action, just one of the permanent members of the Security Council can stop the UN from taking action with its power of veto (Voeten, 2001, p. 845). This power is an absolute mockery of democracy and of the United Nations itself. It allows certain states, based on the power structure of the 1945 world, to put their own interests before those of an entire organization. The power to veto action is a practical, not just a theoretical weakness. In Darfur, China and Russia have threatened to use their veto power should the Security Council attempt to take action to stop the genocide (Reeves, 2005, p. 7). Simply put, the veto power has, on numerous occasions, hindered the ability of the United Nations to uphold and protect human rights.

As a result of its inability, on many occasions, to enforce its objectives, the United Nations has lost much of its respect and regard as an international governing body over re-cent years. Theoretically, it is a strong body, but practically, it is little more than a frail voice that is daily losing its place on the international stage. As a result of these weaknesses, the UN is no longer seen by many as the top international authority. Even the United States, a founding member of the UN and permanent member of the Security Council, has lost respect for the organization's rules and abilities, as has been seen in the United States' invasion of Iraq without UN support or approval. Until significant changes are made to the United Nations, the "crown jewel of human rights" will continue to lose its shine.

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Closing Minds on Campus

by Mark Milke

"Universities are islands of repression in a sea of freedom," said the vice-chair of the US Commission on Civil Rights, Abigail Thernstrom, some years ago.

As true as that crack is about many university administrations with their innumerable speech codes and other paeans to conformity, student unions are even worse when it comes to tolerating dissent.

This is especially true whenever social issues arise. In at least three instances recently, campus pro-lifers have been refused official sanction by student unions at publicly funded institutions.

Club status matters because only recognized clubs can post fliers, advertise, and hold meetings. Without such certification, clubs are *persona non grata*. Out in the real world, it would be akin to denying a political party official status if it had a pro-life plank in its platform.

But in late November, the student union at the University of British Columbia's Kelowna campus refused club status to campus pro-lifers. In North Vancouver, the Capilano College student union also recently refused to grant Capilano Heartbeat (the pro-life club) official status. And in December in Ottawa, the Carleton University Students' Association passed a motion affirming their pro-choice position and denying official status to student pro-lifers.

The thread of justification from all three is that student unions are independent of their universities, some pro-lifers have set up graphic abortion displays on some Canadian campuses, and allegedly, according to the Carleton student union president, some student council members have received threats.

The last claim is serious, but it's separate from the other issues. Some environmentalists act badly at times, including threatening or using violence, but no one would suggest student environmentalists should not be allowed official status. Consistent followers of Mother Teresa's ethics should hardly be banned from having a university club because of the disreputable actions of others.

As for graphic abortion pictures, I doubt undergraduate animal rights activists would be refused club membership just because People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals displayed shock pictures of clubbed seal pups.

As for the independence of student unions, it's a technical issue—they're legally independent, but in the sense a 14-year-old is "independent" of his parents. They still live off the avails of others: operating budgets financed by forced students' union dues (including those of pro-lifers) and buildings largely financed by tuition fees, alumni, and taxpayers.

Regardless, such "independence" is irrelevant to whether student unions will encourage diverse opinions in a manner universities often claim to. For example, UBC proclaims its commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, fruitful avenues of inquiry, and to protect the right to "engage in full and unrestricted consideration of any opinion."

Also, UBC frowns on those who would cut short the free flow of ideas.

"Behaviour which obstructs free and full discussion, not only of ideas which are safe and accepted, but of those which may be unpopular or even abhorrent, vitally threatens the integrity of the University's forum. Such behaviour cannot be tolerated," reads the university's policy on harassment.

Pro-life views are unpopular to some, but even more reason to be protected from harassment and official arbiters of student opinion. University administrations shouldn't have to remind student unions not to obstruct free discussion with their club-limiting behaviour.

Instead, student unions should be in the forefront of allowing fellow students to set up clubs so long as they don't advocate violence. No group should be denied status because it wants to criminalize certain behaviour. Greens,

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The Unintended Consequences of Quebec Child Care Policy

by Charles Lammam

Public policies often result in unintended consequences—situations where a policy produces an outcome that was not originally intended. While some unintended consequences can be foreseen, others cannot, but they should be explained nonetheless. Child care policies—such as the Quebec Family Policy—are an example of policies with notable unintended consequences.

"Universal" subsidies in the Quebec Family Policy

The current child care debate has many claiming a shortage of affordable high quality care. Proponents of this position typically demand that government ought to play a greater role. Indeed, some propose an extension of Quebec's "universal" child care policy to all provinces. Advocates of universal child care must be cautioned, however, of the unintended consequences emanating from such a policy. Economic theory and empirical evidence from Quebec can explain why a universal child care policy may exacerbate the initial problem.

Policies that lower the cost of child care services change the relative prices that current and future parents face. When the price of a good or service falls, more people will demand it, other things being equal. In the case of child care, direct subsidies, or even indirect ones, can cause day care operators to offer more or fewer child care services than they would otherwise. For example, demand-driven subsidies lower the relative price of child care services and offer incentives for parents to substitute informal home or familial care for institutional care.

If the supply of child care services does not increase commensurately with demand,[1] public policies encouraging the use of institutional child care services may unintentionally ration scarce spaces for those who need them most—children from low-income families (Lefebvre, 2004). The Quebec Family Policy has unfortunately done exactly that, among other things. One media source reports that the queue for child care spaces in Quebec may be as high as 35,000 children (CBC, 2005). The situation has worsened to the point that some centres have stopped adding names to their lists (CBC, 2005).

The Quebec Family Policy began in 1997 and introduced a new set of family policies, including significant changes to government subsidies for child care (Baker et. al, 2005). The program provided publicly regulated child care spaces to all four-year-old children in Quebec at a cost of $5 per day. Eligibility did not depend on parental employment. The program was extended to three-year-olds in 1998, to two-year-olds in 1999, and to children one year old and younger in 2000. Today, the province-wide policy provides child care for children less than six years of age at an out-of-pocket cost to parents of $7 per child per day.

Not surprisingly, unintended consequences from the Quebec policy abound. For example, researchers find that "there is a significant gap in quality in child care settings based on socio-economic status" (Japel *et al.*, 2005, p. 28). In fact, not only are children in families with a lower socio-economic status less likely to find child care in regulated facilities, but when they do, they are more than twice as likely than children from affluent families to be placed in *inadequate* quality care (Lefebvre, 2004; Japel *et al.*, 2005). Researcher Pierre Lefebvre, Professor of Economics at Université du Québec à Montréal, explicitly remarks in a 2004 Institute for Research on Public Policy Study: "Most young children from very low-income families or families on welfare do not benefit from subsidized child care, even

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though it is precisely these families who could benefit most" (2004, p. 57).

Baker *et al.* (2005) undertook a comprehensive analysis of Quebec's universal subsidized child care program. Among their most provocative findings were the adverse psychological impacts of regulated child care on children and parents. They find

> …consistent and robust evidence of *negative* effects of the policy change on child outcomes, parenting, and parent outcomes [emphasis in original]. Child outcomes are worse for a variety of parent-reported measures, such as hyperactivity, inattention, aggressiveness, motor/social skills, child health status, and illness. Parental interactions with children are worse along all measured dimensions, and there is some evidence of deterioration in parental health and a reduction in parental relationship quality. These are subjective measures, but the consistency of the results suggests that more access to childcare is bad for these children (and, at least along some dimensions, for these parents) (2005, p. 4).

Conclusion

Choosing the level of public initiatives aimed at child rearing and child care is ultimately a political decision. However, policy makers should be aware of policies that produce unintended consequences. While well-intentioned, policies like Quebec's Family Policy may exacerbate the problem they originally tried to solve. Those who advocate a universal child care policy should learn from Quebec's experience and note the likely outcomes. In Quebec, queues (waiting lists) persist, children from low income families have limited access, and the behavioural development of children suffers. Surely these policy consequences are not what advocates intended.

Note

[1]Note that the child care industry is labour-intensive and providers are expected to provide nurturing care. Hence, the industrial structure implies diseconomies of scale in service provision and suggests a relatively inelastic supply curve in the short term.

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animal rights activists, anti-smoking lobbies, and plenty of others would criminalize certain actions, but no student union in the country would deny them status.

What's laughable about the position taken by some students is that many believe they're truly free-thinking, open-minded, and challenging the status quo.

In fact, they're aping baby boomer protest parents, Michael Moore, and greying New Democrats.

Take UBC's student union's Social Justice Centre. Its mission? "We recognize that there are immense socioeconomic inequalities both globally and in our own communities. These inequalities are inherently unjust. At the Social Justice Centre, we aim to take action to abolish these inequalities. As such, we oppose capitalism and other authoritarian systems."

Instead of such predictable pap, student unions should try to "recognize" something original (for them): the right to freedom of speech and association. ✑

POINT

Advocating Proportional Representation

by Jon Gaspar

This essay compares two types of electoral systems: proportional representation and first-past-the-post (which is currently used across Canada). Although there are different forms of proportional representation, the point of this essay is merely to explain why proportional representation in general is more representative than first-past-the-post. Proportional representation is a more representative electoral system because it accurately translates the ratio of votes to seats, it may increase voter turnout, and it may also increase the proportion of women or other identifiable minority groups in government.

Distorted representation

Proportional representation intends to address the problem of distorted representation by attempting to equalize the percentage of seats a party receives with the percentage of votes it received (Lijphart, 1999, p. 143). Fair Vote Canada (FVC) estimates that if the January 23, 2006 federal election had used a proportional representation system, the Conservative party would have received 113 seats instead of 124, the Liberal party would have received 93 seats instead of 103, and the Bloc Quebecois would have received 31 seats instead of 51 (2006). Conversely, the NDP would

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COUNTERPOINT

Moving Towards Proportional Representation Will Come at a Price

by Jason Clemens, and Niels Veldhuis

A number of jurisdictions, including British Columbia and Ontario in recent years, have taken steps to consider the viability of alternative electoral systems. A proposal frequently recommended is to move towards greater proportional representation. Under this system, there is a closer relationship between the percentage of the vote a party receives and the number of seats it wins. Unfortunately, advocates of greater proportionality tout the benefits of this type of electoral system without addressing the costs. If citizens are to make an informed decision, they must fully understand both the benefits and the costs of changing their electoral system.

One of the effects of greater proportionality is to increase the number of political parties vying for power. Most often, the result is that two to three major parties emerge with a host of smaller parties. Coalitions become the norm rather than the exception.

Proportional electoral systems transfer power from the main parties to smaller parties. In coalition governments, smaller parties are able to exert influence well beyond that afforded them by the electorate because the main parties are forced to broker deals with smaller parties in order to form the government and/or pass legislation. Electoral systems favouring more proportionality generally result in transfers of political power from the larger parties that receive substantial electoral

have received 59 seats instead of 29 and the Green Party would have received 12 seats instead of none (FVC, 2006). You may notice here that proportional representation would raise the voices of smaller parties. These smaller parties, claims former Green Party of Canada leader Chris Bradshaw, tend to think of solutions to public problems that other parties may not consider, and may raise issues that larger parties ignore (Bradshaw, 2001, p. 80).

Voter turnout

A proposed solution to Canada's problem of declining voter participation is the use of proportional representation in elections—proportional representation electorates have a higher voter turnout than first-past-the-post electorates (Johnston, 2001, p. 14). One reason for this is that proportional representation gets rid of wasted votes (Averill *et al.*, 2001, p. 36). With proportional representation, every single vote is counted to determine the number of seats a party receives in Parliament (Averill *et al.*, 2001, p. 36). Under a first-past-the-post system, only the votes for the winning candidate matter, so all other votes are wasted. It has been said that "[p]eople are more likely to vote when they think their vote counts" (Averill *et al.*, 2001, p. 7). By eliminating wasted votes, proportional representation makes sure that every vote counts. The Law Commission of Canada says that proportional representation would make elections more competitive, therefore arousing voter interest and increasing turnout (2004, pp. 39-40). For instance, if proportional representation was used, election outcomes would be much less predictable, and "easy majorities" would be unlikely (Averill *et al.*, 2001, p. 36). As well, the "electoral monopolies" that exist in some regions of Canada would be disturbed (Averill *et al.*, 2001, p. 36). This would give the supporters of smaller parties, such as the Green party, more incentive to vote (Averill *et al.*, 2001, p. 36). Citizens would also see more response in their political system, as seat numbers would be proportional to votes; this may help eliminate the cynicism that many citizens have towards voting (Averill *et al.*, 2001, p. 36).

Women's representation

Unlike first-past-the-post, proportional representation has proved that it can increase the number of women in government. Studies show that in general, more women are

support to smaller parties that that garner much less electoral support.

It is this need to broker coalitions that leads to what is perhaps the single greatest cost of more proportional electoral systems: higher levels of government spending and taxes. The economic intuition underlying such an argument is quite straightforward; the main party is forced to appease the coalition party or parties through spending initiatives, regulatory programs, and/or tax measures.

There is a growing body of research, best represented by a series of studies completed by scholars Torsten Persson and Guido Tabellini, which shows a clear link between the method of electing politicians (as well as the political governance system) and fiscal performance, specifically the level of government spending and taxes.

The Perrson and Tabellini research, which culminated in a 2004 article, "Constitutional Rules and Fiscal Policy" that appeared in the prestigious *American Economic Review*, examined 80 democracies in the 1990s along with a smaller panel of 60 democracies between 1960 and 1998. Their results indicate that political constitutions (elections and form of government) have a causal effect on fiscal policy (government spending, taxes, and deficits). With regard to electoral systems, Persson and Tabellini find that "A reform of the electoral rule from majoritarian to proportional would increase [government] spending by about 6 percent of GDP, financed by higher taxes and deficits in similar proportions."

The Persson and Tabellini work confirms earlier work by other scholars finding similar results. Namely that electoral systems that lead to more political parties and the need for coalition governments result in more government spending and higher taxes. This basic economic intuition is now backed by solid empirical evidence.

Despite this research, some have argued that forcing parties to work with other political parties yields better political outcomes. Such a view completely ignores the fact that the imposition of proportional electoral systems does not create the need for coalitions but rather transfers coalition building from within parties to between parties.

elected in proportional representation systems than in systems like first-past-the-post (Vengroff, Nyiri, and Fugiero, 2003, p. 164). As well, studies of countries that use proportional representation show that it increases the number of female candidates (Vengroff, Nyiri, and Fugiero, 2003, p. 164). This is important because there is a strong correlation between the number of female candidates and the number of females elected (Studlar and Matland, 1996, p. 284). R. Darcy, Susan Welch, and Janet Clark found that countries that use proportional representation have almost twice the number of women representatives as countries that use electoral systems like first-past-the-post (1994, p. 141). Another study by Lijphart supports this claim by showing that democracies that use proportional representation have 6.7 percent more representation by women than countries that employ majoritarian systems such as first-past-the-post (1999, p. 281).

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Moreover, studies have shown that a larger district magnitude,[1] which is associated with proportional representation, can increase the chances of women being elected (Studlar and Matland, 1996, p. 278). Richard Vengroff, Zsolt Nyiri, and Melissa Fugiero claim that electoral systems play an important role in the number of women elected as representatives (2003, p. 164).

Debate continues over which electoral system is best suited for Canada. First-past-the-post may result in more decisive governments, but it does not result in an accurate representation of the general public. If Canadians want to be more accurately represented in government, then a switch to proportional representation should be made.

Note

[1]District magnitude is the number of representatives that are elected in a particular riding. For example, Canada's district magnitude for federal elections is 1 as there is only 1 MP per riding.

Political parties like the Liberal and Conservative Parties are currently forced to build coalitions within their ranks in order to garner enough electoral support (votes) to form a government. The Liberal Party, for example, maintains multiple groups of interest under its broad umbrella, including a pro-business wing, a more socially-focused wing, and an environmental wing. Enacting proportional systems of elections simply removes this coalition building function from within the parties to between them.

Advocates of a more proportional system of elections are correct in arguing that proportional systems better match seat allocations with votes. However, citizens must understand that such a change is not costless. There are significant costs associated with implementing electoral reform based on greater proportionality. Those risks include more and smaller political parties that necessitate coalition governments, which in turn typically result in higher levels of government spending and taxes. Ultimately, citizens must decide whether such costs are worth the benefits of greater proportional representation. ✉

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Things Folks Know …
That Just Ain't So

Compiled by Lindsay Mitchell

What Folks Know

Poverty is increasing in Canada.

Why it ain't so…

Basic needs poverty lines are intended to measure the number and proportion of Canadians who cannot afford the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, and other household essentials (table 1) (Statistics Canada, 2005). Canadians are considered to be in a state of poverty when they lack the income necessary to buy these basic

Table 1: Basic Needs Poverty Lines ($) by Household Size in Canada, 2006

Size of Household	Basic Needs Line
One	$10,314
Two	$16,186
Three	$19,673
Four	$22,852
Five	$25,809
Six	$28,593

Source: Statistics Canada. See Sarlo (2006).

needs. Since 1992, this measure has been an important alternative to prevailing "relative" poverty lines like Statistics Canada's low income cutoff lines (LICO), which are not a poverty measure, but rather a "relative" measure of how well off some Canadians are compared to others. Poverty is fundamentally a problem of insufficiency, not inequality, so to understand how Canadians are doing, we need to know how many of our fellow citizens cannot afford the basic ne-

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cessities of life. The lack of an "official" poverty measure makes it difficult to hold politicians to account for the effectiveness of expensive programs intended to alleviate poverty in Canada.

The "basic needs" approach to measuring poverty shows that the proportion of Canadians living in poverty fell to 4.9 percent in 2004—roughly one in 20 Canadians (table 2)—the lowest level in history (Sarlo, 2006). Dramatic improvements were also recorded in the proportion of children living in poverty. Child poverty rates nearly halved between 1996 and 2004, falling to a historic low of 5.6 percent from 10.9 percent (Sarlo, 2006). This fall in poverty rates is especially encouraging following a lengthy period of stagnation throughout the 1980s and early to mid-1990s.

Over the past 55 years, the poverty rate for Canadian households has fallen dramatically from a rate of 41.2 percent to about 6.6 percent, more than a six-fold decrease (Sarlo, 2006).

That said, basic needs poverty is still a problem. People living in these circumstances cannot afford all of the basic necessities of life and must go to extraordinary lengths to

Table 2: Poverty Rate (%)

Year	All Persons	Children
1973	11.8	12
1977	9.8	9.9
1981	7.1	8.8
1984	8.6	11.1
1988	6.2	7.7
1991	7.1	9.6
1994	6.8	9.1
1996	7.8	10.9
2000	5.7	7.6
2002	5	5.8
2004	4.9	5.8

Source: Statistics Canada. See Sarlo (2006).

pay for the basics (such as borrowing or getting assistance from family and friends) or do without. This should be of concern to all of us. It is nevertheless encouraging that poverty in Canada is declining, significantly over the past decade, but even more dramatically over the past 50 years.

Acknowledgement

This article is based on a 2006 study, *Poverty in Canada: 2006 Update*, by Chris Sarlo. Chris Sarlo is an Associate Professor of Economics and Director of the School of Business and Economics at Nipissing University in North Bay, Ontario. He is also the author of *Measuring Poverty in Canada* published by The Fraser Institute.

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Op/ed Contest Winner

An Elected Senate, Regional Representation, and the "Friendly Dictatorship"

by Brandon Hillis

In December 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper introduced the Senate Appointment Consultations Act, an act that, if passed, would "allow [the] government to consult Canadians on Senate appointments" (CBC News, January 23, 2007). After generations of politicians, academics, and ordinary Canadians lambasting the Senate as an institution that has, in the words of former Prime Minister John Turner, "outlived its usefulness and has become a superfluous appendage to the [Canadian] political system," there is finally a proposal on the table to reform Canada's Senate (Albinski, 1963, p. 378). Unfortunately, the Consultations Act is silent on the issue of the inequity of provincial representation within the Red Chamber. Additionally disturbing is that by making the results of any Senate elections subordinate to the decisions of the prime minister, the act may reinforce rather than diminish the powers of the prime minister within the Canadian system.

The current practice of Senate appointments is outlined in Section 24 of the *Constitution Act, 1867*: "The Governor General shall… summon qualified Persons to the Senate; and… every Person so summoned shall become… a Member of the Senate" (Part IV). Conventionally, the Governor-General acts on the advice of the prime minister when making such appointments, and it is through this con-

vention that the act would be able to alter the character of the Senate without requiring a constitutional amendment. Under the act, people would vote for their preferred Senatorial candidates from a list of nominees and the prime minister, according to the Conservative web site, "would then consult [the results] when making [appointments]," effectively creating an elected Senate (Conservative Party of Canada, 2007). However, even with—indeed, because of—the newfound elected nature of the Senate, problems would continue to exist and could grow in significance.

Given the existing regional breakdown of the Senate, the more populous provinces, specifically those in the West, have little representation in the Upper House, especially when compared to the less populated Maritimes. The Senate is broken down into Québec, Ontario, Maritime, Territorial, and Western regions. Each region has 24 Senators, except the Territories, which have three, and the Maritimes, which, upon the arrival of Newfoundland in 1949, were given an additional six, bringing their Senatorial total to 30. Owing to this breakdown, a highly populated province like British Columbia has only six Senators (the 24 western senators are divided equally among Alberta, BC, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan), one for every 650,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2002). Conversely, Nova Scotia, with 910,000 people has ten Senators, one for every 91,000 Nova Scotians (Statistics Canada).

Given the Senate's present lack of relevance in the political domain, this representational issue is of little concern, receiving only half-hearted criticism. However, should the Senate become elected and regain its importance as an advocate for and "protector of regional interests" without a

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resolution to the representational disparities, this previously negligible dilemma will become a significant problem for the under-represented provinces of western Canada (Hogg, 2006, p. 277). Currently, regional issues are the responsibility of provincial premiers, who, in council of the federation and first ministers meetings, interact on a relatively equal footing, and until the problem of Senate representation is dealt with, either by adopting an equal representation model, like that of the American and Australian Senates, or a "representation by population" model, like that of the German Bundesrat, we, as Canadians, should hesitate to hand that responsibility over to the Senate.

Further concern arises when one realizes that, rather than increasing the strength of democratic participation and diluting the powers of the prime minister, the Consultations Act may serve to strengthen what Jeffrey Simpson has termed "the Friendly Dictatorship" by legitimizing the superiority of prime ministerial decisions over the decisions of Canadians (Simpson, 2001). The act fails to force the prime minister to adhere to election results; he is obligated only to *consult* them. Until either the language in the act is strengthened or the Constitution is amended, Senate appointments will remain largely at the discretion of the prime minister, and until necessary changes are made, this act will dilute, rather than strengthen, the democratic principles of the Canadian political system.

Senate reform in Canada is a must. The Senate is an organization with little purpose, its roles and responsibilities stripped away largely because it is composed of appointed members, who, rightfully so, are afforded little political

power in our democratic society. The Consultations Act attempts to put forth a solution, but unfortunately, it fails to discuss representational issues and is comprised of language that may legitimize and strengthen, rather than dilute, prime ministerial dominance of the political system. Senate reform cannot be effective until these issues are acknowledged and dealt with; the Consultations Act provides a good starting point, but given its noted deficiencies, much work still needs to be done.

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It's Time to End Government Ownership of Housing

by Joshua Hall

From South Surrey, British Columbia, comes news that the Peninsula Estates social housing project is in need of $5.5 million in repairs. BC Housing, a provincial agency that provides social housing for low-income British Columbians, recently issued a report detailing the repairs necessary to make the complex livable. The report calls the state of the walls, windows, doors, and other items in the 25-year-old building's envelope a "systematic failure" necessitating substantial rebuilding and the possible relocation of its current residents.

While it is sad that the lives of the families living in the Peninsula Estates may have to be disrupted to fix these problems, it is even sadder that such a rapid deterioration in the quality of social housing is not unique. The history of government provision of public housing is littered with examples of buildings deteriorating before their time. Probably the most famous example comes from the United States. The Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri, had to be completely demolished only 16 years after construction ended in 1956. The 2,870 unit social housing project was built and designed so poorly that it was largely uninhabited a decade after its opening, leaving government officials with little choice but to demolish the project.

Similar tales of neglect and disrepair can be told of government housing projects across North America. While governments have learned from their most egregious mistakes in the past and have done a better job of social housing design in recent years, elementary economics tells us maintenance and repair issues with social housing units will continue to be a problem in the future.

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The primary reason that social housing is inefficiently constructed and maintained relative to private housing is because social housing managers do not face the same incentives as private landlords do. If private landlords construct poor quality apartments or fail to maintain their units properly, tenants will vote with their feet by moving to other housing, in the process hurting landlords in the pocketbook.

Conversely, the managers of social housing projects face very different incentives because there are no owners, and thus no one benefits from their efficient operation. Suppose the management of a particular housing project did such a great job that demand to live in that project tripled relative to other subsidized units. In the private market, such effort would be rewarded with higher rents and increased profits. In the public arena, there are no higher rents because of subsidization, and thus no profits. The result is that there is little incentive to maintain or improve social housing.

The empirical research on social housing is clear: government production and operation of low-income housing is almost always more inefficient than other forms of aid. In 2003, University of Virginia economist Edgar Olsen surveyed the research on housing programs for low-income households and found that providing the poor with housing through government-provided housing projects is almost always more expensive than government-provided rental vouchers. This inefficiency is why the United States has been shifting federal housing policy away from government-owned housing and towards rental vouchers over the past quarter century.

The solution to the deteriorating social housing in South Surrey and elsewhere is not rehabilitation. While rehabilitation might improve the physical structure of the buildings, it will do nothing to improve the incentives facing government housing authorities. A more efficient solution to providing housing assistance for the poor would be to take the money spent on rehabilitation and maintenance and devote it towards a program of rental vouchers.

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