

ATHENS ON THE HILL

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While touring the country this April and May with a Canadian epic poem, *The Plains of Abraham*, we watched a lot of CPAC. It was fun when things got briefly wild during the week of the confidence vote. But mostly it was a harrowing experience for two young Canadian patriots, one that is about to be repeated as the House of Commons returns next week.

Overall, two facts leapt out while watching the House of Commons. First, much of what goes on in the House of Commons is disgraceful; second, it is irrelevant to Canadians. And it is not hard to infer that the disgracefulness stems from the irrelevance.

The House is irrelevant today because, by-elections and glamorous defections aside, party strengths are decided at election time and after that nothing changes. Discipline is tight, backbenchers are anonymous, and no degree of ministerial incompetence will win the disapproval of the minister's own party. No debate will influence the House, and no speech will change a pre-determined policy. MPs might as well vote by e-mail; to occupy their time and win a few seconds on TV, they seek our attention while only succeeding in embarrassing us all.

'Twas not ever thus. In the bad old days of British parliamentarism — one squire, one vote — “pocket boroughs” were common, and MPs were (by today's standards) paragons of independence. The secret ballot thankfully did away with the anti-democratic side of all this, but it also turned MPs into good party men. Of late they can't even be nominated in Canada without swearing allegiance to the party leader.

Unfortunately, the various proposals for electoral reform in our country do not address this problem. Here's one that does. Let's inject a bit of undiluted democracy — not into the election process, but into the House of Commons itself. Let's go with a Neo-Athenian Parliament.

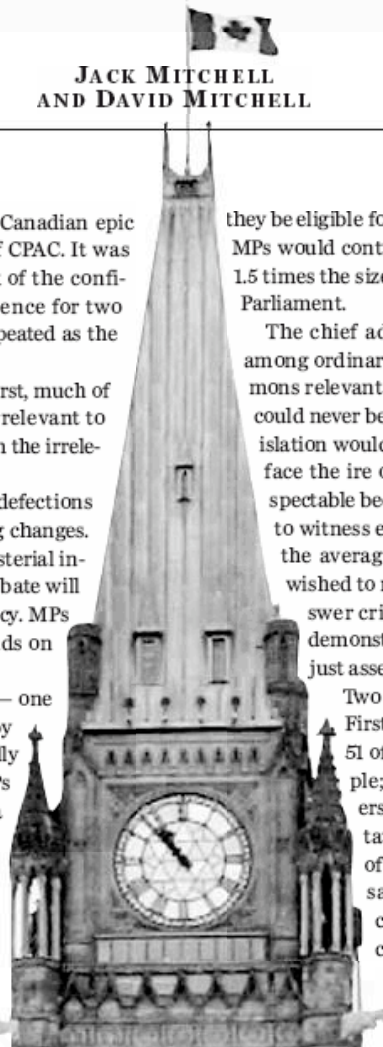
Athens is often praised as the birthplace of democracy, the ancestor of our own democratic institutions. But this is misleading. Athens was not a representative democracy, as modern democra-

they be eligible for patronage appointments at any time in the future. The other 200 MPs would continue to be elected as they are now, though their ridings would be 1.5 times the size of the current ones. Such would be our proposed Neo-Athenian Parliament.

The chief advantage of having 100 MPs in Parliament chosen by lot from among ordinary Canadians is that they would serve to make the House of Commons relevant and respectable. The House would become relevant because one could never be entirely certain how these MPs would vote: the government's legislation would have to be backed by solid speeches and clear arguments, or else face the ire of independent and intelligent Canadians. It would become respectable because the average Canadian is much less willing than current MPs to witness endless juvenile bickering, evasiveness and useless hot air than is the average partisan MP. In the Neo-Athenian Parliament, if a minister wished to retain the respect of one-third of the House, he would have to answer criticism in a convincing manner; if an opposition MP wished to demonstrate the government's unfitness, she would have to do more than just assert it. Backbenchers could make speeches that mattered.

Two other major advantages of a voter-lottery system spring to mind. First, it would result in a more representative House, with for example 51 of the 100 seats going to women and three or four to aboriginal people; likewise, in terms of political orientation, a random sample of voters would introduce a degree of non-partisan proportional representation. Second, our scheme would dramatically increase the number of people who vote and (one hopes) follow politics, since an MP's salary is fairly substantial compared to the average Canadian income, and cash lotteries are popular (particularly with working-class Canadians). One could predict 90% voter turnout.

Finally, allowing average Canadians to sit in the House would prove that the Canadian government belongs to Canadians first and foremost. The perhaps colourful personalities of the



cies are, with leaders speaking for certain constituencies as defined by geography, party, social group or what have you. Rather, Athens was small enough to be a direct democracy, with all citizens free to vote on all major pieces of legislation: they would fill their big civic theatre, the Theatre of Dionysus, about 20 times a year, perhaps 20,000 strong, and vote all day. Life was simple.

Besides being a direct democracy, however, Athens was also a radical democracy. Like any society, it had a large number of committees, executives and important offices to fill, but it filled them in a rather unusual way: by lottery. Every Athenian citizen was eligible — in fact, obliged — to become a juror, or represent his tribe in the Boule, or preside as President of the Pnyx, or you name it, if and when his number came up. A citizen could count on his number coming up at least once a lifetime.

Now, our plan for a Neo-Athenian Parliament in Canada involves nothing so radical as that. We propose simply that one-third of the 300 seats in the House of Commons be filled by lot from the list of Canadians who vote at election time. These 100 non-aligned, randomly chosen Members of Parliament would act in every way like the other 200 MPs, voting on every piece of legislation brought before the House. The two exceptions would be that that they would not be eligible to sit in Cabinet and, though they could sit on Parliamentary committees, they would not be allowed to vote in committee. Nor would

randomly selected MPs would give the media something to write about. And we could change governments without having to have an election, if it appeared that the Opposition could in fact command the support of the House — that support being no longer automatically calculable. There would be a built-in drive to stability, in fact, since the randomly selected MPs would have a vested interest in not dissolving Parliament (at which time they would give up their seats).

In short, a Neo-Athenian Parliament would inject diversity, eloquence, drama, civic spirit, stability and responsibility — democracy itself — back into the House of Commons, without harming our carefully crafted institutions and traditions. It would combine the past and the future. And it would save us from what seems to be a very ugly present.

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Jack Mitchell is a PhD candidate in Classics at Stanford and recently finished a two-month tour of Canada with his Canadian epic poem (www.plainsofabraham.ca), and has a work of young adult historical fiction coming out in October (www.romanconspiracy.com), set during the fall of the Roman Republic. David Mitchell is hoping to join the RCMP.



