

Democracy 250: Newcomer Stories

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I heard the words but at first I did not fully realize the implications, or rather the *legacy* of what I was hearing. Former Premier Doctor **John Hamm** was speaking in the famous room full of the huge political portraits, that is, the Red Room of the Nova Scotia Legislature in downtown Halifax, on Thursday evening, September 18, 2008 for one of the many



Democracy 250 events. We all know this building by its familiar name: Province House. This evening the Democracy 250 event focus was about refugees and immigrants who have decided to call Canada home. They spoke about their experiences, including for some of the speakers, a compare and contrast perspective regarding their home country versus their lives since arriving here.

The Democracy 250 events are all about celebrating 250 years of democracy in Nova Scotia, the first place in North America that witnessed an elected representative democracy, obviously an awesome leap in the evolution of government, to be sure. Dr. Hamm was recounting the earliest days of this representative democratic breakthrough.

“The first elected representatives had to pass a very rigorous and difficult political litmus test. They had to be white. They had to be male. They had to be at least a nominal part of the wealthy power structure in so much as they had to be substantial land owners. And they had to be part of the congregation of the Church of England or the Presbyterian Church.”

Wow, I thought to myself. *The WASPS [White Anglo Saxon Protestants] in control!* Of course this used to be what passed for democracy! So what else is new? And has the world really changed all that much? I shall let the reader muse about *Atlantica*, also known as *Security and Prosperity Partnership*. *Atlantica* is all about control and management of Nova Scotian society by again, mostly white males sitting at the helms of Lockheed Martin, Manulife Financial, Suncor Energy, Chevron and Wal Mart. Executives from these corporations along with government officials and others have been meeting in secret for five years; one of the most recent clandestine gatherings was in June, 2007 in downtown Halifax, Nova Scotia.

This autocratic assembly wants to drain the water, oil, gas and electricity out of Nova Scotia and the rest of Canada, while quickly dismantling the public healthcare system, making tuition so expensive only the sons and daughters of the rich need apply. And forget about the social safety net, with its programs for immigrants, students, women among others. Gone! Also *Atlantica's* plans include doing away with what's left of the union movement. So Democracy 250, and democracy in general has its challenges, if the will of the people is to be heard and followed. Anyway, onward and forward. Let's review what this evening's event was all about?

To begin with a *rant* was displayed on the big video screen in the Red Room. This lively and rhythmic presentation was about the history of government and democracy in Nova Scotia, and beyond.

Joanne Macrae, chair of the board, also office coordinator Marie Kettle and staffer Lauren Dale organized this special evening in the Red Room on behalf of *ARISS Atlantic Refugee and Immigrant Services Society*. They did a great job with the help of the evening's moderator *Street Feat Editor* Juan Carlos Canales Leyton, an immigrant from Chile who has resided in Canada for about 30 years.

After the rant, opening remarks and welcomes were conducted, the panel of speakers was introduced: Dr. Hamm, Juan Carlos, Maria Vasileva, originally from

Romania, Christian Vega from Mexico, Joseph Nyemah from Liberia and Ali Duale from Somalia who made it abundantly clear how wonderful and precious democracy is in Nova Scotia and Canada. It made me pause a bit regarding my own personal rant involving *Atlantica*. I thought if I could see things through the eyes of a refugee like Ali I might be a little more circumspect in my criticisms.

Maria Vasileva came to Canada in 2004. She spoke about her life as a high school teacher in Romania and how the revolution of 1989 experienced the end of communism in her home country. “Now,” she stated, “Romania has many freedoms. Freedom of speech, freedom from fear for many people. Back during the reign of communism if you were the victim of a crime in many cases you feared going to the authorities more than the criminal who victimized you.”



“So people feel they can speak out more now. But there are many freedoms that aren't so good for the everyday working people. There are the freedoms involving capitalism. There is the freedom of wild capitalism. There are the freedoms of prices for the capitalist enterprises. Thus, there is the freedom of inflation.”

“Also corruption and bribery are the order of the day now. To receive some nominal health care, you have to bribe your way through the system. The elites are in power now and the legislative process is often oriented to maintaining that control. Poverty is rampant. The law is skewed against the common person. Someone who is hungry and might steal a little bit of food could conceivably get convicted and have to spend 15 years in prison! Such is the indication of a lack of balance in the workings of the criminal justice process now. Crime and sentencing are out of balance, completely.”

“But there is also some good news since the ouster of communism. Some health care initiatives are taking hold . . . like free prescriptions and free vaccinations. But the shadow of rigid communist control still haunts society, even though some democratic processes are slowly evolving . . . they're at the baby steps stage, now.”

Christian Vega had many dark and disturbing tales to tell about life in Mexico. Christian immigrated in 2006, much in part to get away from the violence of everyday life in his home country. Voting and other forms of democracy have a false face, he maintained.



Democracy in Mexico is a sham and a false simulation, he emphasized during his presentation. Elections involve corruption that is huge, especially with many government leaders complicit in narcotrafficking. Christian stated that the only real option to seek economic relief for the vast numbers of poor and

to corruption. But then, a corrupt reality intervened. The difference between the winning side and the losers was only one half of one percent of the voting totals. Talk about close! The losers demanded a recount.

Vote buying was in evidence during this campaign, also intimidation. People were harassed regarding for whom they would vote and also frightened in such a way to keep them from the voting booths. The main federal elections organization that facilitated the national vote refused to entertain the request for a vote recount. Because corruption prevailed! Then a second request was rejected, also!

There is only a patina of democracy in Mexico. A superficial PR representation of a fair and equitable government. If you are one of the lucky ones protesting this hideous corrupt state of affairs, you are branded a traitor and jailed. The unlucky ones are simply murdered. Violence and murder, Christian was explaining, are the order of the day. So far in 2008, there have been 2000 murders and these are the result of intrigues involving political corruption and narcotrafficking. Actually political corruption and narcotrafficking go hand in hand, with respect to many government officials. Back in 2000 there was some talk of cleaning up government, but in the end the status quo remained. Crime, complicity, organized intrigues with the drug cartels prevailed, and still prevail.

But there has been some evidence of the enforcement of law and order in all of this mess, so at least there has also arisen a little bit of hope. It's the good guys against the bad guys now, said Christian. On one side is the left and the poor. On the other, the rich elites who control everything.

So mostly, despite a few glimpses of positive change, democracy is simply not working in Mexico, Christian lamented. If you speak out you are jailed or murdered. Thousands of supporters of the opposition are now in jail. To seek a basic normal life, the only viable strategy is to flee. To the border with the USA, or beyond.

Joseph Nyemah came to Canada from Liberia in 2005. His home country experiences compare and contrast with those in Canada, that is, his observations of governance and social organization in both countries. But when it comes to elections, he has watched the tremendous violence taking place in Liberia. The politicians in opposition, are often the victims of much intimidation, and thus the corrupt incumbents always triumph. This is mostly because they have unfair advantage: they have much largesse and access to all kinds of mechanisms and devices of the nation state at their beck and call, according to Joseph.



And one of the most disruptive influences against a fair and proper democratic functioning of government was the 15 year civil war fought on Liberian soil. This war did much to skew and scuttle the attempts at building democracy. The war's consequences destabilized well intended efforts at creating good