

## Party's Over: Why We Need to Abolish Political Parties

As Simone Weil observed decades ago, they're self-serving entities that elevate power and control above justice and the truth.

By Andrew Nikiforuk 29 Jun 2018 | TheTyee.ca

In 1943 Simone Weil, a French philosopher and mystic, concluded that political parties had become organizations dedicated to one purpose: "killing in all souls the sense of truth and justice."

Although her radical essay calling for the abolition of political parties wasn't published until 1950, it remains the only polished political stone on a beach now smothered in plastic.

The rightness of Weil's argument is about as obvious as the opioid crisis, the existential threat of climate change or the demise of global economic growth.

In the United States two political parties have now divided the nation with the kind of violent partisan rhetoric that erupted just before the Civil War. Across the Western world, political parties have turned parliaments into digital circuses, provoking waves of contempt among ordinary people.

As a consequence, social research and the daily news suggest that people are losing faith in democracies and looking for dictators to set things right.

Declining voter turnout also indicates that people no longer regard political parties as legitimate instruments of democratic representation.

Canada reflects this dark reality too: every party here seems dedicated to breaking promises or thwarting the public interest with equanimity. It's difficult to tell any difference between Liberals, Tories and New Democrats because all serve power, or the elites that employ that power in a technological society.

Now to truly appreciate the brilliance of Weil's short essay, you need to know one or two things about her. Born in 1909 Weil lived among ordinary working people and donated most of her money earned by teaching Greek and philosophy to labour movements.

She died in a British sanitarium of TB and starvation while dreaming of joining the resistance to Nazism in France. None of her incredibly important work saw the light of day until after her death. In the late 1940's the French writer Albert Camus unearthed some of her most important essays.

Having watched one party after another betray the best interests of working people in Europe, Weil saw what just about any citizen could see today: that political parties seem designed to destroy any vestige of democracy as well as any opportunity for free thought.

Weil measured the performance of political parties against three critical things that matter in life: truth, justice and the public interest. She found that they dishonored all three principles because a party's essential character was against such pursuits.

To Weil all political parties possess three dangerous traits: they work as machines to "generate collective passions;" they strive to exert pressure upon the minds of their members with propaganda; and they have but one goal – to promote their own growth "without limits."

As such every party becomes a means to an end and that end can only be totalitarian in nature.

Weil, then, regarded political parties as self-serving entities primarily concerned about gaining and securing power.

Today we'd recognize many of these characteristics in the constant campaigning, the rigorous branding and the ruthless employment of techniques to engineer votes either through Facebook or data miners like Cambridge Analytica.

Weil traces the origins of political parties to the French Revolution where parties achieved an original partisan brinkmanship. There was one party in power and another in jail. Such total partisanship has become the new holy grail of politics in China, Russia and many failing European democracies.

Weil observed that when a person joined a political party, they gave up any pretense of being interested in truth, justice and the public interest.

Just imagine an MP or candidate, she asked, making the following fantastical declaration prior to an election: "Whenever I shall have to examine any political or social issue, I swear I will absolutely forget that I am the member of a certain political group; my sole concern will be to ascertain what should be done in order to best serve the public interest and justice."

Any Canadian politicians caught making such a declaration today would be demoted, belittled, slandered or expelled from their party.

In British Columbia, for example, at least five prominent BC NDP politicians all voiced opposition to the fiscal and ecological costs of the Site C megaproject while running for office last year. But once their party won power, not one resigned or publicly objected when

Premier John Horgan lied to the public and wilfully ignored the best economic and environmental evidence and approved the project.

Political parties also explain why failing democracies are telling people to eat more cake when the one per cent own all the pastry shops and want to replace the bakers with robots.

As such political parties have become wonderful technical instruments that ensure the political system evades what is just, what is true and what is good in public affairs.

“Except for a very small number of fortuitous coincidences,” wrote Weil, political parties explain why “nothing is decided” and “nothing is executed” in democracies today.

To Weil political parties also managed to create a world that mirrors the dysfunctional life of political parties. In such a bipolar partisan world one is in favour of one thing or against another.

Weil’s short argument for the abolition of political parties still stands as one blazing light in the dimming world of democratic fortunes. Abolishing political parties won’t solve all our problems but it just might remove some obstacles to truth and justice in public life.

At the very least it would make it easier for citizens to talk about the growing list of emergencies unsettling our communities with some clarity and honesty.

Weil ended her brilliant essay cleanly – the way a housemaid might leave an untidy hotel room formerly occupied by a rock band.

“Generally speaking, a careful examination reveals no inconveniences that would result from the abolition of political parties. Strange paradox: measures like this, which present no inconvenience, are also the least likely to be adopted. People think, if it is so simple, why was it not done long ago? And yet, most often, great things are easy and simple.”