

The John Meisel Lecture Series

in Contemporary Political Controversies



Maximum Democracy or Learning to Love the Public

Peter MacLeod

No. 6 • 2024

The John Meisel Lecture Series
in Contemporary Political Controversies

Maximum Democracy or Learning to Love the Public

Peter MacLeod

No. 6 • 2024



Department of Political Studies
Mackintosh-Corry Hall
Queen's University
68 University Avenue
Kingston, Ontario, K7L 3N6

© Copyright held by author, 2024

Cartoon image used with permission Ed Franklin, *The Globe and Mail*

For more information about The John Meisel Lecture Series,
see www.queensu.ca/politics/MeiselLecture

Queen's
UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF
POLITICAL STUDIES

About the John Meisel Lecture Series in Contemporary Political Controversies

In 2017, the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University established a lecture series to honour the legacy of scholarship and public service of Professor Emeritus John Meisel. Always engaged in current public affairs and never afraid to wade into the often choppy waters of political issues, The John Meisel Lecture Series in Contemporary Political Controversies provides a forum for meaningful conversation and deliberation of controversial political issues. Each year, the department invites a junior to mid-career scholar to Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario to deliver a major public lecture that addresses a timely political controversy, followed by a "town hall" style interactive discussion that is open to both the Queen's and Kingston community.

About John Meisel

A professor at Queen's University since 1949, John Meisel has written extensively on the topics of political parties, elections, Quebec politics, broadcasting, and culture policy, and contributed significantly to public debate. His scholarship is noted as much for its breadth as it is for its elegance and accessibility. Meisel served as the founding editor of both the Canadian Journal of Political Science and the International Political Science Review, as well as chair of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), and president of the Royal Society of Canada. He became an officer of the Order of Canada in 1989, and was promoted to companion, the highest grade in the Order, in 1999.

Charming, engaging, optimistic, enthusiastic: John remains all of these things. As a member of the Queen's community, John is all of these and more. He was a wonderful teacher, inspiring generations of students to engage in political and cultural life. As department head, he recruited stellar new faculty, helping to build the department into one of the strongest in the country. He was an enthusiastic mentor, supporting his younger colleagues and drawing them into national and international networks. Long retired but still highly visible on campus, and in the community, John remains a symbol of the best of the Queen's tradition.

About Peter MacLeod

Peter MacLeod is the principal of MASS LBP and one of Canada's leading experts in public engagement and deliberative democracy. Since its founding in 2007, MASS has completed more than 250 major policy projects for governments and public agencies across Canada while popularizing the use of Civic Lotteries and Citizens' Assemblies, and earning international recognition for its work.

He writes and speaks frequently about the citizen's experience of the state, the importance of public imagination, and the future of responsible government.

He and Richard Johnson are also the authors of the forthcoming book, "Democracy's Second Act" which will be published next year.

Table of Contents

[About the John Meisel Lecture Series in Contemporary
Political Controversies](#) i

[Introduction](#) 1

[Where We Are and How History Can Guide Us](#) 3

[Our Complicated If Not Paradoxical Relationship to the Public](#) 13

[What Maximum Democracy Can Look Like](#) 15

Introduction

First, I want to thank you for coming. I was a student of John's and benefited greatly from his kindness and just his way of being an intellectual who was engaged both viscerally and also playfully with the world. It makes returning to Queen's to give this address in his 101st year very special to me.

Second, because my talk is about governance, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the recent passing of Murray Sinclair, who, among his singular contributions to Canadian life, was also the past chancellor of Queen's University. Notwithstanding anything I want to say about the future of democracy, it's the prospect of true reconciliation and the hybridization of western and Indigenous approaches to governance that to my mind are amongst the most exciting sources for our political renewal. Sinclair should be remembered by all of us for his incredible strength and for showing us the path we must follow.

Third, to point out the obvious, I can see now that it may have been a bold choice to schedule this particular lecture not 48 hours after the US election — an election that many of us, myself included, had hoped would turn out differently.

I am afraid there is no sugar-coating this: The repercussions of this election are profoundly destabilizing and they will continue to play out for decades to come. The idea that Trump's first election was an aberration from a normal democratic order is dead, and so too is any claim to American exceptionalism in the face of rising autocracy.

What we cannot do is to allow this election to teach us the wrong lessons about the public — which is to say, about each other. Leaping ahead, there is only one lesson to take: It's that when we do not

energetically and unapologetically work to enlarge the democratic experience of everyone then darker forces will prevail.

This is why I have called this lecture "Maximum Democracy" or "Learning to love the public." What I want to show is that our mature democracy is in fact a minimum democracy — one that reflects our profound skepticism about the public. This skepticism runs throughout our history, and at this particular moment, as we watch an American majority elect a felon and demagogue, it might even seem prudent. It is, nevertheless, a trap because this skepticism disables us from the two things democracies need to thrive: an audacious commitment to realizing human capability and the experience of the state as a catalyst for individual and social development.

What I want to describe is a more maximal version of democracy but one that has little to do with voting or the conventional things we imagine when we think about being more democratic.

But to get to this version, we need to talk about what the public is, and what it means to be democratic.

I want to do this with three accounts — first a moment to acknowledge where we are but also how history can guide us; then to describe our complicated if not paradoxical relationship to the public, and third to sketch out what I think maximum democracy can look like.

Where We Are and How History Can Guide Us

In his final album, just weeks before his death, Leonard Cohen asked: you want it darker? No. I don't think many of us do. But I am going to get dark for a minute. I won't dwell on the likely impact of a second Trump administration, but when we look around the world, we might say, heavily, that it's very much on trend.

Britain has earned itself a temporary reprieve but only following the populist fraud that was Brexit and twelve years of austerity delivered by no fewer than five Tory prime ministers.

The eminent epidemiologist Sir Michael Marmot credits these policies with as many as one million premature deaths in Britain.

In Germany, a country that vowed 'never again' is once again electing far-right parties even after constitutional courts have ruled them to be subverting the German state and with it liberal democratic norms. Last night, its stoplight coalition crumbled.

In France, we have the National Front hastily assembled in an attempt to hold off Le Pen's National Rally.

The Netherlands struggles to sustain a government, with its most popular politician the previously heretical Geert Wilders, himself not able to take the helm but pulling most of the strings.

We see commonwealth countries like India, the world's biggest democracy, deepening its ties with autocrats. We see Mexico determined to sabotage the independence and efficacy of its judiciary.

Here at home, we know that Canada is not immune. Like in other countries, the pandemic provided cover for a different kind of virus to spread culminating in a spasm of lawlessness on the front steps of Parliament. A new generation of Conservatives cheered on and coddled protestors no matter how extreme or implausible their demands.

Canada's largest provinces treat the Charter like an inconvenience rather than an obligation, while they and others openly defy the authority of the federal government.

The situation for too many elected politicians is no better. If representative democracy depends in large measure on the decency of good people willing to stand for public office, we should be alarmed that fully 9% of municipal politicians in Quebec elected in 2021 have resigned. They cite an environment of near constant harassment leaving them to conclude that the job just isn't worth the cost to themselves or their family.

Sadly we shouldn't be surprised that the majority of resignations come from women and racialized office holders.

Of course we have been too slow to realize that lurking beneath and fanning much of this democratic dysfunction are the agents of what might best be called anti-democracies... Russia and China chief amongst them, and their domestic enablers.

We are naive if not totally complacent about the extent to which we have permitted our information sphere to become compromised. The most florid and toxic examples of free speech increasingly appear to be examples of paid speech seeded by malignant bot farms working to sow distrust and disillusionment.

Contributing to this is the collapse of much of Canada's fourth estate — its local and national media. Some 300 news outlets have vanished within the last decade, with the rest hanging on only because of an overdue and insufficient public subsidy.

So where are we?

Well, 2024 was to have been the year of mass democracy.

In an unusual alignment of electoral calendars, a quarter of the world's population has or will cast more than 2 billion ballots in 50

countries. In better times, this would be cause for celebration and tribute. Countries would issue stamps and the UN would say solemn, worthy things. After all, this is surely a demonstration of democratic strength, several centuries in the making.

Why then do we see so many signs of weakness?

It's because the warning signs have been flashing for a while and we have chosen to ignore them.

Rather than take them seriously politicians keep trying to squeeze out one more win and treat a deeper sickness like a passing cold.

The simplest measure — voter turnout — has been eroding in this and virtually every other western country for the past 30 plus years.

By the early 2000s, everyone was talking about the 'democratic deficit.' We can all say it together because it marks the start of a thousand popular and academic articles: "the decline of trust and confidence in government and public institutions..."

Maybe it's a refrain whose repetition has numbed us to its significance.

A few politicians in this country did pop up with promises to take the issue seriously. Some even created secretariats and ministries of democratic renewal which after twenty years have accomplished exactly nothing. I'm told one politician, riding a wave of popular support, even promised to change the electoral system, for good.

And so not unlike the other great crisis of our time, climate change, we persistently ignore clear warnings and make every excuse to keep up appearances and pretend that it's still business as usual.

...Even when party memberships vanish.

...Even when parties discover that they can barely give them away.

...Even when local nominations become something of a joke, and then a national security risk.

We keep telling ourselves this is normal. Inevitable, even.

That political majorities won with minorities of just half the population voting is still somehow winning.

We have been lying to ourselves and about the games that we play.

And who when pressed do we blame?

We blame the public — for being apathetic or inert. For being ignorant, or worse. For not playing the game.

And we do it even while watching all of the things we know democracy needs slip away: economic security and equality, a vibrant civil society populated by large member-based organizations, a strong, competitive and independent media, energetic political parties with genuinely active memberships. This is the 'min spec' but every one of these preconditions has been diminished or else hollowed out entirely.

Maybe it's just nostalgia but I think it helps to look back — to remember a period not so different from our own, less than a century ago.

In America, the Roaring 20s had given way to the Great Depression of the 1930s — a quarter of the US population was unemployed and everywhere petty tyrants were making mischief. In Britain, Oswald Mosley, a one-time rising star of the Labour party who came within 100 votes of beating Neville Chamberlain, defected to create his New Party — the British Union of Fascists.

Thousands of his Blackshirts brawled on the streets of east-end London, but to the city's credit they were matched 50 to 1 by more than a quarter million counter-protestors.

Still, far too many people were falling under the sway of authoritarian logic and demagoguery, and the fate of the world's democracies appeared to hang in the balance.

In New York City, the original display of American fascism packed Madison Square Gardens and incredibly, each week, one quarter of the country tuned into the charismatic radio broadcasts of an increasingly anti-semitic, fascist sympathizer and Roman Catholic priest, Father Coughlin, who I'm sorry to report to you was born in Hamilton, Ontario.

In the midst of this turmoil, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, first elected in 1932, was making preparations to take a reluctant nation to war.

And while he began to set into motion the full might of American industry to supply the war effort, he was also preoccupied with the psychological effects of war. His answer was to establish the now largely forgotten Committee for National Morale.

The committee was made up of an extraordinary group of luminaries including the husband and wife team of anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, alongside the child psychologist Erik Erikson and the pioneering pollster George Gallup who among many other things would write, with Bob Rae's father, a book about the promise of polling called the "Pulse of Democracy."

(Mindful that John was the chair of the CRTC, you can see my efforts to inject a bit of Cancon.)

Now, Roosevelt understood the perils of war. He knew that if he was to successfully prosecute the war, his government would come to manage much of America's economy and critically its information. The habits of mind and beliefs of the American public would be forged by the experience of war. And so the question he asked the committee was this: how could the American public be mobilized in a top-down, command and control system to fight a total war against Nazis and not risk becoming, in effect, Nazis themselves, with an absolute view of their superiority and rightness.

Right now there's a lot of talk about the rise of the authoritarian personality. But in the early 1940s, the Committee on National Morale was tasked with understanding its opposite: how could government cultivate a democratic personality?

Of course to do this, they had to first define it. What was a democratic personality?

Their answer is ingenious and, I believe, is as relevant to our time as it was to their own. They concluded that a democratic people must have the ability to maintain confidence in their own identity while also feeling comfort in diversity.

In other words, a confident pluralism. People need to be able to believe in themselves while also taking an interest in the beliefs of others.

The committee's insights filtered through the American government and became the organizing principle for twenty years of popular education and cultural programs that reached tens of millions of people.

The committee recognized something about the plasticity of the public: that public attitudes are not static; they can be shaped and reshaped. The democratic art was in the nature of the programming: did it lead people didactically towards simple answers or did it cultivate critical thinking and an appreciation for different perspectives?

Necessarily, the committee drew a clear distinction between information and propaganda, a distinction that would find expression through separate arms of the American government's communications agencies, the best of which were preoccupied with developing strategies that could inform without indoctrinating.

In a surprising twist of trans-Atlantic fate, the committee also included and collaborated with members of the German Bauhaus movement, who were vanguard modernists preoccupied with what they

called a new humanism. Their ideas would find architectural expression in the design of light-filled spaces and crisp, new typographical conventions that together would transform the built and visual environment in support of democracy, and a set of universal aspirations predicated on social and material progress and greater equality. Their ideas provided a new vernacular for federal buildings, national exhibitions, fairs, films, books and broadcasts and alongside a new and incredible array of consumer goods largely created the landscape for post-war American ideals.

Now today, we might ask "what business does government have cultivating a democratic personality?" and what would it entail? But faced with existential threats, FDR had little patience for this line of thought.

He believed that only an inventive, high energy politics, operating at scale, meeting the power of its adversaries by using every economic, scientific, cultural, pedagogical and communications tool available, could create and protect an environment safe for democracy.

And backing this up was an audacious promise: to deliver to America four freedoms: the freedom of worship, the freedom of expression, the freedom from want and the freedom from fear.

His proposition was that an American secure from material need and violence, and enjoying the liberty to say whatever he pleases and worship whomever she wants was an American capable of extending that same generosity to others, and possibly to the world.

What followed was a burst of investment and cultural energy: federal art, theatre and music projects which combined employed 25,000 artists and workers to deliver hundreds of thousands of performances and artworks to an audience nearing 30 million.

Then there's the Civilian Conservation Corps, which itself employed three million Americans and was accompanied by a massive adult education and recreation program.

In local communities, the Works Progress Administration built or refurbished more than 1,000 libraries, while elite institutions like the Smithsonian and the Metropolitan Museum of Art were mobilized as platforms for popular education.

The Office of War Information struck up partnerships with newsgathering organizations and Hollywood alike to develop popular education programs, counter misinformation and reduce public anxiety during a time of global uncertainty. And all of this is without mentioning the program that unlocked higher education and housing for fully 10% of the population, permanently transforming America's economy and society: the GI bill.

The reason I'm describing all of this is because the purpose and scale of this era stands so apart from our own. It was a time that grappled directly and seriously with the threats that it faced — and those threats are near mirrors for our own.

Too much of Roosevelt's relentless ambition and his committee's insights have been forgotten. Today they feel out of reach, but they still require us to ask: Are we building up or only drawing down our democratic inheritance? When will we stop playing small ball?

John Hopkins professor Yascha Mounck suggests an answer when he warned us eight years ago that only 1/3 of young people in the US, Britain and Australia consider it essential to live in a democracy.

It's only when set against the backdrop of wartime America and the precipitous decline in support for what we might call 'democracy as the default,' that perennial calls to teach more civics in schools sound laughably anemic. Or incredible, if not surreal, that at a moment when

our media landscape is clouded by misinformation and private news media are in freefall, that we would seriously consider defunding a public broadcaster.

How do we make sense of this?

In another era, anticipating a very different American moment, Bob Dylan sang, "That he not busy being born is busy dying."

So here's the thing about it: Let's understand democracy not as a static set of institutions or simple proceduralism, but as a propulsive force. Democracy must always make audacious claims against the future, otherwise its present failings lead it to falter from its own hypocrisy. This means that democracy has just two settings: it is either moving forward or falling back.

But we can only believe in democracy, much less its future, if we also believe in people and this leads us to the next chapter of our story: our ambivalent relationship with the public.

Our Complicated If Not Paradoxical Relationship to the Public

One of the contradictions of democracy is that we simultaneously venerate and denigrate the public. We talk it up and we talk it down. In a society that should be demophilic — where we love the public — we often act demophobic, as though we are afraid of it.

We see this reflected to us in popular culture: Horrible, pessimistic classics like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, warn us from a very tender age that we live in a brutal state of nature and that no one can be trusted.

When we get older, we learn about things like the Stanford prison experiment, one of the cornerstones of twentieth century social psychology, which magnifies the lie and has only recently been debunked as a fraud.

We see our contradictory attitudes towards the public baked into our most esteemed institutions. Lawyers make the money, judges have the authority, but it's a jury of one's peers that remains the true engine of justice, trusted with holding even a former president to account. But where do we find juries? Usually in the lesser parts of a courthouse — cooped up in a fluorescent lit jury pen until called, but usually just dismissed.

We see this in our politics: no sooner did Organizing for America, the mammoth grassroots network, succeed in electing the first Black man president of the United States, then it was disbanded.

Almost every policy a government contemplates puts people at the end of the process, not the beginning, with consultation either an afterthought or calculated to do an end-run around more meaningful engagement.

And this is the perverse thing: We keep sinking deeper and deeper into the habit of treating the public like a risk that needs to be managed rather than a resource to be tapped and renewed.

And you know what: people can smell it. They know when they're not being respected, or when they're not welcome or taken seriously.

We are stuck in a cycle of mutual antagonism, where our beliefs about the public become self-fulfilling: we ask less, manage more, diminish trust—and when people inevitably act out or push back, we retreat further. This cycle reveals a deeper issue: it's not only that people don't trust government; it's that government doesn't trust people.

It's their capability and energy that should be a democracy's source of strength — only it isn't when we waste it. While we should be busy designing people in, we keep designing people out.

This inverted, up-is-down view of the public is what's poisoning democracy from within.

Walter Lippman, the great political commentator, famously referred to what he called the "phantom public." What he meant was the impossibility of a singular public that could fully grasp the complexity of the world. Better he thought to have well meaning experts make decisions, and keep the public well back.

Can we at least agree that we've given it a-go? In fact, we have been operating at such a remove from the public that if not a phantom, it has at least become something so distant and disembodied that we can project on to it almost any prejudice or belief.

So here's the test or thought experiment that I'll put to you: if we didn't already have juries, one of the oldest and purest expressions of our democratic ideals, would we, in our time, create them?

What Maximum Democracy Can Look Like

So where to from here?

My contention is that the only way to get out of this democratic rut is to rev the engines, and fire up our democratic imagination once more.

We need to stop thinking about democracy as being at its end, and instead imagine that we have barely entered its adolescence.

Here in Canada, the last big democratic wave secured the idea of responsible government and elected legislatures. It took about a century to fully take root between 1742 and 1848. Even then it took another eleven decades to fully enfranchise our adult population.

So that's three hundred years, give or take, just to bed down the idea of the vote. But this achievement isn't the end game and our responsibility is more than maintenance.

It's time to match the audacity of our first franchise by adding a second, and write the next chapter of our democratic evolution.

This photo is part of that story.



The woman on the right should be immediately recognizable: It's Beverley McLachlin, the former Chief Justice of Canada from Pincher Creek, Alberta. On the left is Dawn Sugimoto, a resident of Lethbridge, Alberta.

For reasons you can name, this photo could not exist fifty years ago, much less one hundred.

And until this moment, they had never met. The former chief justice is there because she was chairing a three year commission on democratic expression and online harms for the federal government. Dawn is there because she got a letter in the mail inviting her to volunteer to serve on the commission's citizens' assembly. It asked a lot of her — some forty hours of her time — which is far more than a public meeting. But Dawn signed up, and her name was drawn alongside 41 others who won the civic lottery. A few months later, she was in this room.

Dawn is awesome but she isn't exceptional. She's one of 1700 Canadians who have quietly been part of a vanguard experiment probing the future of democracy. Together, they have been demonstrating the capability and readiness of people to play a greatly expanded democratic role — but one which doesn't replicate the pathologies of partisanship or polarization, and instead focuses on problem-solving and finding common ground.

It turns out that in Canada, we did reinvent the jury for our time but true to ourselves we barely know our own stories.



And while what began here in British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly Electoral Reform and continued here in Ontario never delivered the electoral changes they intended, they did inspire what happened here: in Ireland where assemblies have gone mainstream and delivered

stunning constitutional reforms, including legalizing same sex marriage and finally ending Ireland's abortion ban.



Incredibly, in the twenty years since British Columbia held its first assembly, some 1,000 citizens' assemblies inspired by Canada have taken place around the world.

Which is why you can find remarkable photos like this one from Eupen, Belgium. This is their regional parliament. On the left are the elected parliamentarians, on the right are the selected members of the citizens assembly who each year meet to determine one or more issues that subsequent assemblies will examine in close detail.



And when I look this photo, I'm reminded of this painting... from the first legislative assembly in lower Canada in 1792. Here are two paradigms of democracy meeting. On the left, the appointed legislative councillors, on the right, the elected members.

Imagine the suspicion, the confusion and discomfort in this room — the nascency of an audacious idea being instantiated and making an extraordinary claim to legitimacy and power.

In both images, 230 years apart, democracy is being born.



As it is here, in the third chamber of the French parliament, where the country's second national citizens' assembly is meeting to determine whether and under what conditions medically assisted dying should be legalized.

In each instance, randomly selected citizens are being invited to play a role that goes far beyond voting. They are being asked to exercise public judgement, to work as public representatives and with their peers to find a quality that often eludes electoral politics: consensus.



These assemblies are at work not only in high politics but in local politics as well. Here I am, last month, chairing one of Canada's most recent assemblies on the proposed amalgamation of BC's capital Victoria and its neighbour Saanich.

Residents in both communities voted in a referendum to create this assembly. 10,000 letters were sent to residents and some three hundred

volunteered. They will spend eight Saturdays together and if they recommend change, then it goes back to referendum.

What I love about this is how quietly radical it is. Seated at the front are the city managers of the two communities and the region. The members of the public aren't lined up at a microphone or waiting to have their five minutes to deliver their deputation. Instead, the city managers delivered to them the same presentation they would have made to their elected councillors, explaining patiently and in detail how their municipalities operate. It's only possible because of a shift in how they understand democratic representation.

This is at once a profoundly different way of doing democracy, but one that is wholly consistent with the trajectory of our democratic evolution.



Somewhere in this photo is Dawn, seated in the final session of the Canadian Citizens' Assemblies on Democratic Expression. Many of its recommendations have been written into bill C-62, Canada's Online

Harms Act that is struggling through parliament and would regulate social media.

To me this is another photo illustrating democratic paradigms — two ideas about legitimacy, capability and representation that are alive at once.

One group of selected citizens in the foreground is sending another group of elected citizens in the background, in parliament, its considered views. It reminds me of William Gibson, who famously observed "that the future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed."

And also of my own joke: what's the difference between a first term MP and a member of the public?

About half a million dollars in human resources.

Right? Because the thing is this: when you're elected you suddenly benefit from the resources of an institution on which we rightly spend some 750 million dollars each year. You have a scheduler and an assistant, and colleagues to help you find your bearings, and a whole library to supply you with research.

Yet when we have a public meeting, what resources do we put into support the people attending? And so I wonder what it would mean, if we spent even 50 dollars, much less \$5,000 supporting citizens to play a bigger role?

What I want you to see is that for everything that is wrong and deficient and menacing, we also live at a moment when we can see a new democratic idea coming into view.

It's a vision of democracy where we all get to choose but we also get to be chosen. It's this expansion of our democratic franchise that is at the core of what I think maximum democracy can look like.

Maximum democracy is not a democracy of the simple majority or a democracy of constant referenda. It's not voting on

everything. Maximum democracy is a democracy where governing itself becomes a platform for cultivating the democratic personality of the mass public — only to do this we have to let them in.

I want to share one last example that I think gets to the heart of what's possible.



This photo appeared in the New York Times in 2016. Sawsan and Muaz Ballani are standing at the centre. Around them are the four different families which in 2015 joined together to sponsor the Ballanis' arrival in Canada. This group came together because the year before Canadians were horrified when they saw the heart-breaking image of a young Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, washed up on the shores of Turkey, his boat having capsized as his family tried to make their way to Greece.

Canada announced it would welcome 25,000 Syrian refugees through its refugee resettlement programs. But this wasn't nearly enough. Soon Canadian groups like Lifeline Syria demanded that Canada do more and

in response the federal government turned to its long standing private sponsorship system — a brilliant example of civic innovation.

The groups of five program as it's known allows groups of Canadian families to sponsor a newcomer family and help them get settled. It's a tall order. You have to raise \$30,000, and take responsibility for housing, language instruction, employment and schooling. Basically these groups are left to figure it out, and they use their ingenuity, common sense and local networks to make it work.

It's a big responsibility. But with little prompting and without a major federal advertising campaign, more than 125,000 Canadians stepped up, almost doubling the number of Syrians Canada would ultimately accept.

Not only did the Canadian public prove itself willing and capable, we also know eight years later that Syrians sponsored by these families have been doing as well or better economically than those supported by our hard working settlement organizations.

This experience, hiding in plain view, gives us a glimpse of what's possible when we work with the public as partners. When we tap into this enormous resource, we unlock the talents and ingenuity of our population. In doing so, we create a sense of common purpose and collective efficacy. It's the kind of thing that builds up our society and ultimately strengthens our democracy.

Contrast this, however, with the pandemic. In the early days of COVID-19, the federal government did think to activate Canadians. It invited Canadians to volunteer by adding their contact information and a brief list of skills to an online registry. Presumably, they would help with contact tracing or if they had medical skills, possibly be deployed to help nursing staff. Again, almost overnight, some 50,000 Canadians

volunteered. But days later the website disappeared. No one was ever called.

What we've since learned is that in an emergency, governments across Canada were more comfortable calling on McKinsey and Company than calling on their own people.

If ever there was a moment to mobilize the public — to raise an army and rush into the gaps our public services couldn't begin to fill — it was during the pandemic. Instead, we became spectators to a social tragedy.

This is where we have gone wrong: we characterize our democratic challenges as problems of scarcity because we imagine the public to be too ignorant, selfish or apathetic to do more.

Our real challenge is a problem of abundance — we haven't begun to design the programs, services and opportunities to soak up the vast civic energy available to us.

What prevents us is our prejudice. We are trapped in old beliefs about what people are, what leadership looks like and what's possible.

To be democratic, you have to love the public — all of it. Not just your segment or corner. We need to build a society that edifies the public and its potential.

Last February, I received a letter from another member of the Dawn's Assembly, Cheryl Lloyd, when bill C-62 was introduced. Cheryl has done a lot of different jobs and she boasted to me about how when she worked in the air force, she was small enough to actually get inside the wings to clean the tanks.

She wrote: *Ooo! Peter! Hi, everyone!*

Oh, this is great news! I'm bouncing in my chair, trying to type. When this goes through (notice I'm being skeptically optimistic), we'll have done something concrete to help others. You know, I'm more proud of our work with CADE than I am with my 8 years of military service. Go figure!

I'm holding my own these days, transitioning to full pension (and the attendant government screw-ups) and actually enjoying my life now. My books are being recorded as audiobooks, so I'll have a bit more of an income coming in. No, I can't afford a trip to Toronto. Yet. But I'm working on it.

My best to everyone.

Every student of politics eventually learns Gramsci's maxim "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."

To meet today's monsters, we need maximum democracy and to find our faith in the public.

While people want a say and will flood social media, they are also willing to serve. It all boils down to this: The problem isn't that we ask too much of people but too little.

In the end, democracy is not how we vote, it's how we show confidence in ourselves.