



## WINNER TAKES ALL by Alec Bruce

# If not us, in our democracy, then who?

**I**n a little more than a month, Canadians will line up to cast their votes for those who they believe will best represent them and their country.

Or they won't.

Participation rates in federal elections are now worse than those of high school student council plebiscites. In fact, over the past several years, electors of all ages have voted with their derrieres firmly planted in seats.

In the ballot that formed the first government of this nation in 1867, nearly 74 per cent of the eligible population arrived at the polls. It's been more or less downhill ever since.

**Now, coming into yet another federal election, I wonder how low these values will sink in 2015 – 55 per cent, 40 per cent?**

In October 2008, a mere 58.8 per cent thought well enough of their democracy to get off their couches and venture to the nearest ballot station. That mandate recovered, somewhat, in the May 2011 federal election when 61 per cent of the voting public deigned to exercise its constitutional right of self-government. Still, the trend, established by a weary and suspicious public has been established and entrenched.

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In one sense, all of this is understandable. Given the wholesale destruction of public

trust that elected officials have engineered over the past several years, it's almost miraculous anyone votes at all.

Supremely reluctant citizens believe that they queue up like sheep in a corral, baa-baaing amiably amongst themselves, wise-cracking about the time this process steals from their variously productive lives. They sense in their bones that Canada has become a corporatist, not a socially democratic – or even an entrepreneurial – society.

They think, with some justification, that their country has become a system of winners and losers – in which the winners get rich, fat and complacent, and the losers get poor, lean and angry.

They hope, with waning conviction, that the rest, the in-betweeners, the formerly middle-class, won't get fleeced, slaughtered and served at soirees for massive commercial interests, who have

mined this nation's hard-earned tax money for their own ends.

Sure, I get it. I feel the risible anger in my own chest whenever I read the headlines about the latest bank scofflaw, slinking off with a government-sanctioned slap on the wrist and fully endowed golden parachute.

But here's the thing: Nothing will ever change when the disenfranchised refuse to embrace the one enfranchisement their democracy still offers free of charge. And that's one vote for one woman and one man in the parliaments and chambers of a still-enlightened society.

Imagine the alternative: a country run by corporate referenda, in which individual dissent is a crime punishable by law; a nation ruled by edicts of law and order and not by principles of justice and common morality; a polity so afraid of the shadows it casts that it refuses to consider the plight of the less fortunate who haunt its back alleys, where shadows never vanish.

We voters may never fully believe in our pluralistic, democratic system, but unless we exercise our right to vote we will never fully understand it, or, more importantly, comprehend how to change it.

We, the people, remain the only agent of transformation that's durably important in this society. We won't find this instinct living in the banking sector; we won't find it flourishing on Bay or Wall Streets; we won't even find it blooming in the privilege-lined halls of Parliament Hill.

We will only find it where it fully began: Around a kitchen table, in a home, where we pay our bills and debate the issues of the day, before we read our kids and grandkids to bed.

Then, we will find it again, on the ballot line, when we take a few minutes from our important day, to exercise our right to choose who best represents us.

And, as we make our mark, hand it to the kindly returning officer, and spin gleefully into the chill October air, we may remember that who best represents our country is none other than us.

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#### FEEDBACK

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