



OPINION

Canadians get a failing grade in civics

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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As a former civics teacher, it gives me no pleasure to report that Canada is failing the real life test on the rights and duties of citizenship.

Based on recent and consistent evidence, it is clear that many Canadians, whatever their political leanings, appear to lack basic understanding of the workings of our parliamentary democracy. Much worse, others weaponize their misapprehension of our political processes and rights to attack and shrink their opponents, along with anyone else who happens to be in earshot. Some are even elected officials.

And the really troubling and bottomless part of all of this is that we are gradually losing something imperative in the fog drifts of ignorance and disinformation – namely, how to effectively wield our individual and collective power within a democracy. We are losing our people power.

Just how dire is the state of civic and political literacy in Canada? Consider the following sample pulled from this year's headlines. First, protesters arrive in our nation's capital and demand to form a coalition government with opposition parties. In order to accomplish this feat, they casually attempt to enlist the help of the Senate and Governor-General, waving them over as if they were putting up a barn and needed an extra set of hands (the Queen was not invoked as far as I know). Next, a residents group in one of Canada's largest cities decries that a plan for a bike lane violates their Charter rights, robbing them of fundamental freedoms and personal dignity, perhaps relying on a different interpretation of "mobility rights."

Finally, in the House of Commons of all places, an MP from Alberta stands up and, with the help of a dictionary but without a hint of irony, describes how many believe the Prime Minister is a dictator who took control by force – months after an election (which her party lost) and days after a freshly minted deal (which a third party agreed to) that secured his party's minority government for another three years. Also in the headlines that week: an actual dictator invading and occupying sovereign Ukraine.

Politicians are poisoning our own democracy

If these examples were rare or mere flourishes of rhetoric – exaggerations to land a point – they could be forgiven and forgotten. But unfortunately, they are all too common and all quite earnest. And all quite wrong in their application of political knowledge. During the lesson on informed, active citizenship, these folks skipped ahead to the active part.

In Ontario high schools, civics is a mandatory half course taught with varying degrees of expertise and enthusiasm, and there is no coherent approach to teaching the subject across provinces and territories. Effective courses in civics should go beyond the minutiae of parliamentary law-making and teach how power works, our rights and responsibilities and how to make use of them for individual and collective good. Yet, too often what students get in these classes is a slog through different levels and branches of government, and a stream of decontextualized information they can't wait to forget.

If civics education is failing our students and the adults they become, it's logical to conclude that we need to beef up the curriculum. One approach could be to teach political systems starting in Grade 1, or have each province make civics a full-year course mandatory for high school graduation. We could also lower the voting age to 16 so young people establish good participation habits.

Some of these might be ideas worth pursuing, but educators know from experience that simply adding more to the curriculum won't lead to student engagement and success. Doing more of the same thing that already isn't working is a pitfall of educational reform.

A better way might be to get rid of civics classes entirely and incorporate the active-citizenship component into other classes. The best civics lesson – the one that sticks – could actually take place in science or art class by giving students the autonomy to identify an issue students care about, then guiding them through the process of becoming informed

advocates. Maybe the issue they want to champion is climate change; maybe it's graffiti murals.

As they delve into a topic they are intrinsically motivated to pursue deeply, they explore the institutions and examine the decisions responsible for the status quo. The social and political knowledge they gain and apply in this inquiry process is twinned to their emotional attachment, and endures. Agents of change are developed. People power is restored.

Of course, this is already happening in schools across the country, but it isn't nearly widespread enough. Infusing active citizenship across school subjects where students take control of their own learning will help to recharge Canadian democracy. It is our best defence against ignorance and disinformation.

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