

Democratic principles even more important today

by Mark Pavilons

Ontarians just had a chance to exercise their privilege of voting in last week's provincial election.

Like the outcome or not, we are lucky that our system allows for, and even encourages, our input and participation. Believe it or not, our politicians want us to be engaged.

We have a bit of a love-hate relationship with democracy but now, more than ever, our democratic principles are vitally important.

Canadians will have another chance to exercise this privilege when a federal election is called, perhaps as early as this spring.

There has been some turmoil lately, as federal parties gear up for a vote. While Trudeau is on his way out, he still touts our Canadian way of life and our strong sense of nationalism. He tells the world, and more specifically our American neighbours, that we are strong and united. We will not give in to thugs or economic extortion.

During all of this, we should cherish all of the sacrifices made in two world wars and various conflicts to preserve our free way of life. We should never take our freedoms for granted, ever.

We've enjoyed ever-expanding human rights under our Charter since 1982. The anniversary is marked every year on April 17. This document (I was lucky enough to witness its implementation) solidifies the very essence of democratic rights - religion, speech, media, assembly and more.

We get stuck on minor hurdles in our evolution to become truly woke. But that's okay. And we constantly ask for more. And that's okay, too because we are allowed to.

Essential elements of a democracy include pluralistic political parties, fair elections, transparent governance, politically engaged citizens, civil liberties, and free media.

We have those in spades, but many, many countries do not. Our southern neighbours used to enjoy these, too, but lately they're being curtailed, much to the world's chagrin.

The Human Freedom Index is an annual report that evaluates the state of human freedom in 165 countries and territories around the world, representing 98.8% of the human population as of the 2023 HFI report. The HFI is a broadly comprehensive measure that encompasses both personal and economic freedom and then merges the two into a single value titled simply "human freedom."

The Human Freedom Index is co-published by the Cato Institute, the Fraser Institute, and the Liberales Institut at the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. The countries with the highest Human Freedom Index scores are widely considered to be among (the freest countries in the world). The Human Freedom Index gives each country a score from 0 to 10, in 86 indicators. These scores are carefully weighted and combined to determine the values for personal freedom and economic freedom.

In 2023, the Scandinavian countries dominated the top 10. Sitting pretty were Switzerland and New Zealand in number one and two respectively. Canada came in at number 13.

The worst include Syria, Yemen and Sudan.

Personal freedom involves such indicators as the fairness of the laws, personal safety, freedom of movement and assembly, freedom of religion, freedom to run for political office, freedom of the press, freedom of speech and expression, and freedom to pursue

same-sex relationships or obtain a divorce.

We have these in spades, too, but the landscape is constantly changing.

North Korea is controlled by a dynastic totalitarian dictatorship, which maintains its harsh control with extensive surveillance, arrests and brutal punishment for those suspected of political offenses. The ruling Communist Party in China has grown more restrictive with state agencies, the internet, religious groups, universities, and businesses. Thailand is ruled by a unit of military leaders that has suppressed political opposition and exercised 'unchecked powers' secured in the constitution that restrict citizens' civil and political rights. In Qatar, other political parties are not permitted, and elections don't affect the highest levels of government. Political parties are banned within the seven Emirates and hereditary rulers hold all power, with which restrict civil liberties of citizens and visitors alike.

Many of these are rampant with corruption. It seems humankind's hunger for power and greed are alive and well, and reducing citizens to serfs.

By censoring the internet or barring access, authoritarian governments and dictators can more effectively keep their citizens oppressed, and people in these countries lose a vital tool that would help them set up fairer, more democratic institutions.

President Trump has already curtailed certain freedoms and made widespread funding cuts that will also hinder social freedoms. He is also selective in which media gets to report on the White House.

To me, these are all dangerous precedents. They may set the stage for other countries to simply jump on the oppressive bandwagon and continue to thwart human rights.

We see the problems; have identified the countries and leaders with poor track records. If we truly believe in furthering democratic principles around the globe, I say we take stronger actions.

I believe we should decrease ties, implement sanctions and shame those who routinely suppress human rights, imprison and harm their citizens.

I have always been optimistic that all world nations can come together, cooperate and end imperialistic, totalitarian dictatorships, so people can be free.

And yet, recent actions by the strongest free nation in the world have left me with a heavy heart.

The former guardians of world peace are quickly becoming self-appointed crusaders, for the interests of a few, not the many.

What is happening to those enshrined unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government ...?

If the U.S. continues to slash civil liberties and mutual aid, we are in for a heck of a ride.

Buckle up, everyone.