

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Are they really under-represented?

It was British Baron Leonard H. Courtney, way back in an 1895 article, who coined the famous cautionary phrase that: 'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics.'

The rampant abuse of 'statistical evidence' still abounds, and it's certainly not restricted to any particular group and/or ideology. Everybody does it.

We see it often, for example, in medical scare stories, where somebody will declare that a particular food or airborne element 'doubles' the risk of a particular ailment. Sounds scary alright, but if the risk is, say, one in 100 million, then doubling that risk isn't exactly enough to warrant concern. On the other hand, if the risk was one in four and it was doubled, then we've got a problem.

But that's the thing with statistics. They can 'and often are' be used to 'prove' any thesis that the user wishes to promote and far too often an unsuspecting media 'or more likely a sympathetic media' goes along with the distortions.

Take for example an article in Friday's Toronto Star headlined: 'Parliament's lack of diversity goes beyond race, gender: study.'

Written by Nicholas Keung, the paper's immigration reporter, it cites a demographic 'study' by Torontonians Kai L. Chan, all of it 'based on information found on the official and personal websites of MPs and senators, as well as other publicly available data.'

The main complaint, of course, is that Parliament does not represent the diversity of the country, either in terms of race, gender, religion, language or education.

To support his thesis, Chan, among other examples, found that while 23.3 per cent of Canadians are visible minorities, they account for just 12.3 per cent of the Commons and the Senate. The Tories 'naturally' fare worst, with just 10.2 per cent visible minorities, compared to Liberals, 13.4, and NDP, 14.4, not doing much better.

He uses the same argument for women, median age and other things, but since space is limited, let's focus here on his main theme, i.e. the lack of diversity as seen through the 'underrepresentation' of visible minorities.

At first glance, it seems like an open-and-shut case: 23.3 per cent are visible minorities yet only 12.3 per cent are in Parliament.

But things aren't quite that neat and tidy. For one thing, what percentage of visible minorities 'compared to everybody else' are of voting age?

More importantly, however, visible minorities tend to be concentrated in and around the major cities, overwhelmingly so in and around Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. So it's simply not legitimate to take an overall number and apply it to a system where we elect people on a riding-by-riding basis.

Without getting overwhelmed 'or bored silly' by statistics, just consider a few examples to illustrate the shortcomings of Chan's universal approach. According to the 2011 census, the representation of visible minorities ranges wildly from city to city 'and is exceedingly low in most rural and small town areas. Toronto, for example, had 49.1 per cent visible minorities, Vancouver, 51.4, Calgary and Edmonton about 30 each and Montreal, 31.7. But Quebec City had just 4 per cent, Halifax, 9, Sudbury, 2, Kelowna, 7.6. And so it goes, simply illustrating that the national numbers can't be applied to specific local numbers and lead to legitimate conclusions.

So even if visible minorities only voted for other visible minorities 'which, of course, they don't' it would not appreciably change the outcome because of their concentration in a few areas and scarcity in others.

Chan said he was prompted to his study over concerns about the small percentage of parliamentarians with science and engineering degrees, something he calls 'abysmally low.' He says these skills are essential to sustained growth and suggests Canada should copy Australia and Belgium by making voting mandatory to 'force political parties to offer a slate more aligned with the demographics of their constituencies.' Really?

Actually, Chan found women make up 27.6 per cent of our Commons and Senate. In Australia's national parliament, women represent 27.3 per cent. Riddle me that?

The biggest irony of this entire story, however, was that Chan, the champion of diversity, is currently living in Dubai and working as a policy adviser to the prime minister of the United Arab Emirates, where 'diversity' clearly is a four-letter word.

In much of the UAE, apostasy is punishable by death. So too is homosexuality, and women often need permission from their 'male guardian' to marry.

Indeed, women who complain of being raped are often charged criminally for having sex outside of marriage, and it's illegal to criticize the royal family or form labor unions.

Some diversity. Some 'study.'

