

RADIO AS INSTRUMENT OF DEMOCRACY

RUTH I. MCKENZIE

Farm Forum has made the greatest contribution to the democratic society of Canada, by providing organized study, thought, discussion and possible mode of collective action. It is democracy on the march.

EAST COALDALE FARM FORUM

WE hear a great deal these days about democracy, and we pride ourselves on living in a democratic country. Few of us, however, stop to think what true democracy is. Perhaps our conception is like that of the American soldier who tried to explain to a Russian soldier in Berlin.

"It's like this," said the American. "When I go back to the States, maybe I might go to Washington. And maybe I might visit the White House. Maybe I might get an interview with President Truman, and if I did I could tell him what I think of his policies—what I like and what I don't like. And then I could walk out of the White House, and no one would touch me."

"Well," said the Russian soldier, "Maybe when I go back home, I might be able to go to Moscow. And I might get into the Kremlin and maybe I could have an interview with Stalin. And if I did, I could tell him what I think of President Truman's policies."

This story, told at the expense of the Russian, reveals just as effectively the American's rather naive conception of democracy. Freedom to elect a government and freedom to criticize that government—this is what living in a democracy means to most people. In practice, the citizens of our democracies are largely unaware of the responsibilities which belong to citizens. A proportion of them turn out to vote on election day, feeling that by so doing they have done their duty until the next election. From one voting day to the next they are free to criticize the government on which they have placed full responsibility for the country's welfare.

This attitude has led to the habit of shifting all blame when things go wrong to "the government," which we think of as a sort of sly and evil bogey that will get us if we don't watch out. "It" gets a large share of our income and, in the view of

many people, "it" is not to be trusted. We tend to forget that we elected "it", that "it" represents us, and if "it" doesn't do as we want, we are to blame, for we are ultimately responsible—at any rate we are, if we really believe in democracy. The basis of a true democracy is the citizen, and the truly democratic citizen is a participant in the government of his country, and he has a strong sense of responsibility in that respect. Participation and responsibility—these are the keynotes of democracy.

The question is, how can twelve million citizens participate in the government of their country even if they do feel a sense of responsibility? And will they ever develop an adequate sense of responsibility unless effective ways of participation are found? If we can find satisfactory answers to these questions, we shall have solved the dilemma of the democracies.

It is obvious that twelve million citizens cannot all sit in parliament. The best they can do in that respect is to elect representatives to sit for them, as they now do. But suppose these twelve million citizens really took it upon themselves to try to gain an understanding of the problems facing the government—price control, housing, dominion-provincial relations, health insurance, unemployment, to mention a few. Suppose the citizens discussed these problems in their own communities, studied the facts and issues involved in each, and made up their own minds about what should be done. Would any member of parliament then dare not to give a good account of himself? Would not each representative of the people be "on his toes" to keep abreast of the people's ideas at home? Would not the people take care to choose representatives who would take the job of government seriously, rather than act as if it were a political game for personal advancement as so many do now? And would not the people at home take their own local politics more seriously? Would they not wake up to the fact that responsibility begins at home, and there are many community jobs to be done? In the little country of Denmark experience has shown that this is actually what does happen when the people are awakened to their sense of responsibility. Through an excellent system of schools, through adult education in the folk schools, and through the practice of co-operation, the Danes learned to take responsibility in both business and government affairs. Their government, before the Nazi invasion, was probably more truly "responsible" to the will of the people than that of any other country.

The situation, however, is more complicated in Canada

because of our mixture of races and religions, our geographical expanse and our thinly-scattered population. We face the problems of disunity and provincialism in addition to irresponsibility and lack of participation. But these problems are all tied inextricably together. Solve the last two, and the first two will disappear. Democracy is more than politics. It is a way of life. It is an attitude towards people. The practice of democracy requires a technique which can be learned. Once learned, the technique can be applied to all problems both great and small, local and national, political and non-political.

The ideal time to learn the technique of democracy is in childhood, at home and at school. Very few of us, unfortunately, have had this privilege. The "Do-as-I-say-because-I-say-so" attitude of parents is disappearing, but not fast enough, and only the most progressive teachers have learned to minimize the self-assertive and competitive tendencies of their pupils. The best most of us can do is pick up the democratic technique from experience. Our hit-and-miss experience can, however, be supplemented by the more orderly methods of adult education when suitable educational programmes are available. In this respect we are fortunate in Canada in having two such programmes on a nation-wide scale—Citizens' Forum and National Farm Radio Forum.

* * * * *

Both are listening-and-discussion-group projects. Both are arranged by the Canadian Association for Adult Education and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Farm Forum has an additional sponsor in the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. The two programmes are fundamentally the same in purpose and technique; but whereas Citizens' Forum is directed at the citizens of Canada in general, Farm Radio Forum is directed towards a particular occupational group, the farmers. The topics discussed in Citizens' Forum are mainly political, economic and social problems of national and international scope. In Farm Forum the topics are also of national and international scope, but they are usually directly related to rural life. For example in 1945-46, Citizens' Forum discussed such topics as full employment, housing, health insurance, Canada's stake in the Pacific, export trade, international cartels and race prejudice. Farm Forum discussed the relationship between soil and nutrition, health insurance in relation to the health needs of farm people, farm organization, the "spread" between

producer and consumer prices, export markets, and world food needs. Ideally these two Forum programmes would amalgamate, so that urban and rural people would discuss the same problems. It is more than likely that this development will take place in the future, but the time is not yet ripe. In the meantime, through these two programmes farm and city people are gaining a better understanding of each other's problems and a greater respect for each other's opinion. And both groups in their own way are learning the techniques of democracy through their respective Forum programmes.

How are the techniques learned? Let us take a typical Farm Forum neighbourhood group as an example.

Every Monday night, from late October through March, this group meets. Perhaps there are ten families in the group, and they take turns meeting in each other's homes. At first they are rather skeptical of the Farm Forum idea. They are glad of the opportunity for social contacts, but they can't see what practical value there can be in discussing the list of topics in the Farm Forum programme outline which they have received. However, they must expect several surprises. Pretty soon they find that there is a lot more in Farm Forum than the socialability, though that remains important. Their discussions are lively. In fact they often have trouble bringing them to an end. They learn a lot from the study bulletin, *Farm Forum Guide*, and from the broadcasts. Old accepted prejudices are questioned and sometimes rudely jolted. They learn to express themselves better and with less self-consciousness. They learn to listen with respect to the opinions of other people. When they hear the provincial news report based on the "Forum Findings" at the close of each weekly broadcast, they are amazed to discover that many other Forums reached the same conclusions as they did. (They all discuss the same questions.) They are even more amazed on the monthly national round-up of Forum opinion to hear that many Forums in other provinces share their views. It is an eye-opener for a group of farm people in Nova Scotia to discover that their ideas are shared by farm people in Ontario, on the Prairies and in British Columbia. As a Nova Scotia Forum said, "The review broadcast gives the views of rural people from East to West." And a British Columbia Forum, "Farm Forum is a bond which unites the farmers across Canada."

The Farm Forum groups also get great satisfaction out of knowing that the views of farm people are actually given a

hearing on a national radio network. Not only that, but summaries of their opinions are often sent to provincial and Dominion authorities. A Saskatchewan group expressed their satisfaction this way. "Farm Forum brings our problems and opinions in front of the proper authorities and enables the government to get an idea of the people's wants. It makes us feel as though we at least have a chance to have a say in how things are to be run."

Thus Farm Forum is effectively disseminating information and training rural citizens to take an intelligent part in forming public opinion on which legislation is ultimately based. However, public opinion alone is not enough. Our citizens must learn to take action and to work together in those local projects which depend upon themselves. Here again, Farm Forum has been useful. Many local activities have grown out of Farm Forum discussions—township area school boards, dental clinics for schools, county and district hospital enterprizes, warble fly eradication, co-operative marketing schemes, and dozens of other projects. One of the most notable took place in Nova Scotia in regard to veterinary services. A Farm Forum group in Hants County decided something should be done to make veterinary services available. They brought up the matter at a joint meeting of several Farm Forums, and a resolution was sent on to the county executive of the Farmers' Association. A committee was appointed, which later met the provincial Minister of Agriculture. He was sympathetic, and the final result was that Nova Scotia was the first province to have a veterinary assistance policy for farm people. Municipal veterinary services, financed by the local people with assistance from the municipality and the province, were thus made available.

The important thing about these projects is that the people taking part learn to take responsibility for neighbourhood affairs and to work together on accomplishing things of importance to everybody in the community. The old individualism is seen to be ineffective in meeting the needs of a community or district, a province or nation. That is why any adult education programme which is to provide a training in the techniques of democracy should be based on groups rather than individuals. While the basis must be the group, it is equally important that every individual in the group should be a full participant. This he is in Farm and Citizens' Forum. The groups are small so that everyone has a chance to join the discussion and eventually to hold office or serve on committees. If the groups become

large, as they frequently do in Ontario Farm Forum, the practice is followed at meetings of forming into small groups for discussion purposes. Then all come together to report the results of their discussion, and to try to reach conclusions agreeable to the meeting as a whole.

* * * * *

What has been said about Farm Forum applies largely to Citizens' Forum too. Citizens' Forum groups, of course, are not limited to people of common neighbourhood or occupational interests. It is harder also in Citizens Forum to achieve as great a degree of concentration and sustained interest among groups, since there are more competing activities to attract urban people. The two Forum programmes are, however, essentially the same. Both provide for complete participation of the individual, and for group thinking and group action. Both provide background material on the topics for discussion, both provide radio broadcasts on which two or more types of view are presented, and both are nation-wide.

While the Citizens' and Farm Forum programmes seem to be on the right track in their aims and methods, they fall far short of being as effective as one could wish. The bulk of the population is not yet organized into study groups. In 1945-46 National Farm Radio Forum had over 1300 active groups representing about 17,000 farm people. Citizens' Forum had about 500 groups representing about 5,000 people. Many more people must be reached, if the Forums are to be the force for democracy in Canada that the folk schools have been in Denmark.

The main obstacles in the way of expansion are the following:

1. The difficulty of keeping local interest sustained in a national programme.
2. The suspicion held by many people that the Forum programmes are politically partisan.
3. The problem of financing provincial Forum offices.
4. Lack of knowledge on the part of available leaders regarding the techniques of group organization and operation.

The difficulty of keeping local interest sustained in a national programme is felt keenly both in Farm Radio Forum and in Cit-

izens' Forum. Export trade, for instance, means mainly apples to the Annapolis Valley farmer, meat, poultry or dairy products to the Central Canadian, and wheat to the Prairie farmer. A Citizens' Forum programme on labour problems means something quite different in an industrial city like Hamilton, Ontario, from what it means in a small western town like Souris, Manitoba or in the Peace River area. It is difficult to prepare broadcasts, study material and discussion questions which appeal equally to Forums in all parts of the country. And it is difficult to bring out the local significance of a broad national or international question. Yet the advantage to be gained by a national programme in respect to national unity and citizenship outweigh the advantages to be gained by a number of local programmes dealing with specific regional problems. Perhaps in the future a way will be found of meeting both local and national requirements.

Although both Farm and Citizens' Forum have denied officially many times that they have connection with any political party, many people continue to hurl the accusation of partisanship at both of them. One has only to look at the sponsorship to see how foolish this accusation is. Neither the Canadian Association for Adult Education nor the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation could afford to become a mouthpiece for any political party, and it is of course contrary to their policies. The same is true of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, which receives its financial support from the leading farm producer organizations in all provinces. It is written into the C.F.A. constitution that the Federation shall be non-partisan. Provincially too, the Forum programmes are supported by governments representing all the leading political parties in Canada.

The problem of financing provincial Forum offices is a vital one for the future of the Forum programmes. Administration of the Forum groups has to be done provincially in a country as large as Canada, but how to raise the funds to do this for a non-commercial project is a tremendous problem. Both projects have been helped by provincial Departments of Education and by Extension Departments of Universities. Departments of Agriculture have given assistance to Farm Forum in all provinces. Farm Forum has been fortunate also in being able to appeal to agricultural organizations for help. Collections or fees from the Citizens' and Farm Forum groups provide additional funds. Experience has proved that the best organiza-

tional work can be done by arousing the interest of local leaders, but there must be a well-staffed provincial office to cope with the co-ordination of organization activity, the mailings, summarizing of findings and general publicity.

Finally, since the Forum programmes are doing pioneering work, they are of necessity feeling their way and experimenting in the techniques of group organization and operation. The available leaders are all relatively inexperienced. This is true on all levels—national, provincial and local. It is hoped that experience and training will produce more skilful leadership in the future, and more effective methods of adult education through study groups.

None of the problems facing Citizens' and Farm Forums is insurmountable. In districts where interest is keen, the Forum programmes gather adherents as a snowball gathers snow. If this potential interest could be aroused among the people in all the rural areas, villages, towns and cities of Canada, we would have the most enlightened citizenry on the face of the earth and our government would be the most truly democratic. If this seems too visionary an ideal, we can at least strive to have the Forums become the leaven in our democracy, and we can look to the time when, through the participation and sense of responsibility thus engendered in our citizens, our national way of life will truly represent "democracy on the march."