

# Teaching Tomorrow's Leaders Today

*We can't expect tomorrow's leaders to be effective citizens without teaching them how government works today.*

*By Peter Russell*



The good news is that Ontario is the only province that mandates civic education in its schools.

This takes the form of a half-credit course in Civics at the grade 10 level.

The bad news is that the curriculum and recommended text-books for this course fail to give students a grounding in the fundamentals of our system of parliamentary democracy.

The Ministry of Education's curriculum document contains plenty of material on the importance of being a global citizen and understanding a variety of different beliefs and values. However there are only a few lines on the need to understand how the country is actually governed.

The key overall expectation reads: "Students are expected to describe the main structures and functions of municipal, provincial and federal government in Canada."

What this means will depend on the knowledge of the individual classroom teacher, and the problem is that many of them have little knowledge of key institutional features of our parliamentary system of government.

The fundamentals of Canadian parliamentary democracy – constitutional monarchy, Sovereign, governor general, lieutenant governor, prime minister, premier, cabinet, responsible government, the confidence principle – are not mentioned in the curriculum.

Under this curriculum, students could take the course and still not understand how Kathleen Wynne got to be Ontario's premier or why a defeat on her government's budget means Ontario might have a spring election.

Nathan Tidridge, an award-winning Ontario high school teacher, has pointed out these inadequacies in the civics curriculum.

He has also combed through the text-books recommended by the Ministry of Education to support the curriculum, and found that they contain egregious mistakes and yawning gaps.

For example, one text-book explains that the "fight for Responsible Government" was all about becoming a republic.

Another tells students that the Lieutenant Governor is appointed by the Governor General on the advice of the provincial premier.

And a third that the prime minister is the leader of the party with the most MPs.

Tidridge's submissions have been strongly supported by leading educators and by the Churchill Society for the Advancement of Parliamentary Democracy.

But so far, all have been given what amounts to a polite "brush-off" by the Minister of Education and senior officials.

The Ministry says that enough consultation has already taken place on a new curriculum, although there is no evidence of its consulting knowledgeable scholars in the field of parliamentary democracy.

The Ministry says it is not its job to correct any short-comings in the recommended civics textbooks.

Rather, it says it is up to Mr. Tidridge and his supporters to make the rounds of the publishers to correct mistakes in the books they recommend.

There is alarming evidence that young Canadians are significantly less engaged in the institutions and practices of Canadian democracy than they ever were in the past. Two recently published books, Paul Howe's Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians, and Henry Milner's The Internet Generation: Engaged Citizens or Political Dropouts, present compelling evidence of political illiteracy and disengagement among young Canadians.

Voter turnout has been falling among all sectors of the electorate.

But it is lowest among the youngest voters. Less than 40% of registered voters in the 18 to 25 age group voted in the 2011 federal election.

Education alone is not a panacea for young Canadians' turned off from democratic politics.

But it is a good place to start, and above all in Ontario where we have a platform for doing this - in the civics instruction mandated for our schools.

I hope that it is still not too late, for the province's Education Ministry before it finalizes its new curriculum, to take advantage of the insights and advice of one of the provinces' most gifted teachers - Nathan Tidridge.

#### **About Peter Russell**

Peter H. Russell is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Toronto. He is one of Canada's leading constitutional scholars, has published widely in the fields of aboriginal policy, the judiciary and parliamentary democracy, and is a frequent commentator on Canadian government and politics. He is the founding Principal of Senior College at the University of Toronto. Peter Russell is an Officer of the Order of Canada and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

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