

Attendees

ELIZABETH SMYTHE, Robert Ascah

Transcript

Robert Ascah: Today it's my pleasure to speak with Elizabeth Smythe about the current state of democracy in Alberta.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: Glad to be here.

Robert Ascah: Elizabeth is professor Emerita political science at Concordia University of Edmonton. Welcome to the program I first met Liz while working at the provincial department of federal and intergovernmental affairs back in 1983.

Ms. Smythe was a senior intergovernmental officer whose principal job was the energy portfolio, always a very demanding file in Alberta. Elizabeth holds a PhD in political science from Carleton University. She has spent her entire academic career at Concordia, retiring several years ago. Her research is focused on international political economy, especially negotiations over trade and investment rules and the transnational social movements. Recently, she completed teaching a course on democracy as part of the Edmonton Lifelong Learners' Association, ELLA, and we will draw on her insights from teaching that course.

So, let me set the table. For me, over the course of Danielle Smith's premiership, I have become increasingly worried and troubled about how she governs. With regard to her predecessor, Jason Kenny, while I had serious concerns about his policies, I never doubted that Kenny respected institutional arrangements, notably the rule of law and respect for parliamentary government. However, with Ms. Smith's government, there has evolved a long list of measures which have attacked certain groups such as the transgender community by limiting, for example, access to health services. Her government has systematically eviscerated municipal government autonomy, most notably changing electoral rules.

In addition, there's been consolidation in policing, which portends a world where policing and the administration of justice conform to a particular ideological view, for instance, as "public safety" becomes a code word for attacking homeless encampments. And don't get me started on her aggressive demands that the government of Canada, or in her nomenclature, "Ottawa" conform to the wishes of Alberta's oil patch.

So Dr. Smythe let's start the discussion at a high level and step back and talk a little bit about why democracy is so central to the discipline of political science and...and some of the different definitions of the word over the

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: I think it's certainly to western political scientists and I think that's because the historical struggle in terms of how systems of governing evolve has really centered around control of decisions in terms of people's lives and the western version of democracy really evolves out of what I think [Gabriel Almond](#) has called a struggle between capitalism and democracy as an American political scientist near the end of his career in comparative politics. He wrote quite a seminal piece on how democracies emerge and the tension and relationship they have with capitalism and most of the academics in political science in the western world, I would say, for certainly even prior to the Second World War have had a central preoccupation with the development of democracy and the extent to which democracy can be exported, the conditions under which it can be expanded and more recently the conditions under which it can be eroded.

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ELIZABETH SMYTHE: So I don't want to overgeneralize in terms of political scientists' focus on democracy but I would say certainly in terms of what we might call western political scientists in Europe,...North America that would be the central preoccupation certainly for the last I would say almost a hundred years.

Robert Ascah: so thinking a little bit about the power to control other people's lives, perhaps just ununpack that a little bit and the notion of the state certainly has changed dramatically from the 15th century to the 21st century, as the state has sort of invaded our lives in many different ways. What types of measures would we be talking about in terms of that form of control?

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: Obviously the state at one point historically...again if you're focusing on the west you would be looking at what were basically absolute monarchies and then you have the emergence of groups challenging the monarch and historically that struggle evolved into one where the ability of monarchs to have absolute control was eroded and different classes or groups emerged that began to be the dominant voice. And so the state evolves from one centered around a monarch and the monarch's supporters to one dominated by what we might call different classes in Marxist sense in terms of the aristocracy and an emerging commercial class. And so, in many countries that was the first struggle. And then the second struggle comes in terms of the concerns about individual freedom which get articulated in the 17th and 18th century and evolution towards in many cases what we would call liberal and representative but I would not call democratic and they were liberal in the sense they began to focus on individual freedom and limits on governing authority and representative in the sense that absent a monarch the bodies that represented the commercial and the aristocratic classes became the center of power. And so that's sort of the story up into the 1800s.

And then where we evolve toward more democratic political regimes is with the emergence of the industrial working class, unions and the struggle over the vote which occurs at different points in different countries but all of them pretty well somewhere between the mid 1800s if you're thinking about women getting the vote right into the period after the First World War. And so, it's only when you get, I would argue the mass of the population being able to have a voice in terms of choosing those representatives that we get something approaching what we would call today democracy.

And along with that there's a shift in thinking about what constitutes freedom and liberty and the early notions of liberal representative political regimes was that freedom and liberty were really about limiting state authority over aspects of our individual lives. But as you get more broader classes voting, you get a rethinking about the role of the state in terms of what's often called positive freedom, that is leveling the playing ground to some extent so that other groups and classes can develop. And that's where you start to get public education and various limited kinds of support for people that is part of the evolution eventually into

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what in some countries we call a welfare state.

Robert Ascah: what we have now in a way is the neoliberal reaction to the state and what it believes is the overarching control of the state over people's lives and that's of course manifested both in the Birchler society in the US an extreme example of that Danielle Smith and Donald Trump and so on. What about the whole apparatus of the state and how that ties in with kind of class conflict and how would you, I suppose, situate that in Alberta's case in terms of dominant economic forces- how they've co-opted and I guess I'm leading you here -co-opted actors in the states and particularly so-called political parties that are supposedly democratic in their nature.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: I think I have to clarify a little bit.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: So you're making a case that the state has co-opted certain groups ...

Robert Ascah: The state is being co-opted.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE:

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ELIZABETH SMYTHE: I mean in the case of Alberta you've had the earlier history of the broader more agrarian movements and then you have the discovery of fossil fuels and the evolution of almost, I don't want to say a petro-state because I don't think that's fully

accurate for Alberta, but the emergence of a class of people and a party that come very much out of the interests of the fossil fuel industry and the relative decline of the agrarian sector in terms of GDP and employment etc.

And so the sort of the Lougheed era on you have those forces becoming quite dominant. But you do still have a role for the state in providing things around infrastructure and elements of if you think of the telephone telecommunication system. You think of airlines, you think of a number of areas where there were Crown corporations and where the state saw itself as having a certain role. So in that sense Alberta's been dominated by the sort of corporate fossil fuel linked group for ever... since really the industry started to become dominant. What's different in the post-war period is the grip of neoliberalism and the retraction of the state even from those earlier areas such as we had under Lougheed also an increasing emphasis on reducing corporate and other taxes and not raising royalties to spur on the industry even more into areas of non-conventional resource development. So I mean you still have that dominance, but what you have is the peeling back of the role of the state to a more limited one.

And within that context more and more and more of the burden in terms of the cost of that being in eroding public services and other ways in which you're trying to have a free lunch. You're trying to have very low corporate taxes; you're trying to not raise royalties and in the process you have to find other revenue has basically allowed public services to erode and so I think that's been a part of the story.

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There's push back because ultimately you do have more people who are dependent on those resources than you have corporate executives and that's where the element of democracy comes into things in the sense that you do have people who do value those resources or who are reliant on those resources. And so, we do see a shift to a situation in terms of our politics now where we do have increasingly a kind of a two-party system where we do have one party articulating not necessarily sort of a strong working class identity but an identity that focuses on ensuring that ordinary Albertans have adequate access to services like education and health care and so I think Almond's point was, to a certain degree, once you have a pluralistic politics of more than one political party and you have the challenges of capitalism in terms of inequality you start to get taming capitalism to a degree... which we saw in the welfare state. Then we saw the backlash to the welfare state and now you could argue we're seeing a struggle over how we're going to resolve that conflict around the conundrum of keeping all these corporate taxes and benefits to corporations. And at the same time, we're going to satisfy some of those democratic

demands for better services and even adequate services that aren't eroding given population growth and inflation.

Robert Ascah: So, then there's the question of the measures that the UCP government has employed to vitiate the redistributive policies of previous governments and...and the province building that Lougheed and others were central to developing a modern social infrastructure. What role do you see the universities playing and what have you seen evolve over the last 10 years or so that attempts to change the balance of forces on this question about limited state versus a more encompassing state.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: I saw it very much in terms of what's called democratic backsliding. and that really refers to an internal process. In other words, it's not the CIA coming in and overthrowing the Chilean government. It's an internal process whereby usually some sort of a movement or populist leader emerges who takes it upon themselves to roll back many of the constraints of a liberal democracy, often under the guise of challenging some sort of corrupt elite or some sort of out group that is somehow threatening the nation and the people defined in a certain way. You start to see what is called executive aggrandizement where more and more power goes to an executive that sees itself as an embodiment of the people. You start to get measures that seek to weaken or undermine institutions that would limit the power and authority of that executive. And you see that in Alberta. we've seen it across a number of countries in Europe. People are now seeing it in the United States. And I would argue you certainly see it in Alberta. And there are certain elements to it that are fairly common. And one of them is related to the universities.

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And the universities are often independent centers of thought and speech and research that are seen to be threatening or seen to be tied to a elite that are somehow threatening the executive that embodies, the anti- elite. And so, you see universities being undermined in terms of free speech, you see them being undermined in terms of things like underfunding in the case of public institutions. you see them being undermined by attempts to control research and to ensure that research follows certain ideological predispositions. And I have to say in the case of Daniel Smith, she was very blunt about that in her attempt in Bill 18 to start vetting academic research.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: She literally said that, if we vetted it, there would be more conservative oriented research. I'm sure she meant the humanities and social sciences.

So you see a lot initially in bill 18 that was part of that agenda of weakening universities as independent centers of knowledge and research and ultimately speech that could

challenge the governing authority. And so it's pretty standard in democratic backsliding to see an attack on universities and...

Robert Ascah: So, was that the bill that really prevented federal contracts from going to universities and...

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: Exactly.

Robert Ascah: municipal governments and so on.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: And initially it would have included post-secondary institutions and research grants. Now there was push back and this is where this is the hopeful part. The push back really came from the universities themselves and most importantly I think their faculty associations and student unions and a realization that attempting to do this in a context where research grants are being allocated across Canada that it would simply kill research at a major Alberta postsecondary institutions and so an amendment eventually exempted the universities but it was an attempt to control them through research. There's also a whole strain in both our current premier and the kind of people she appoints to advise or investigate if you think of the Manning report dealing with COVID there's a streak of kind of anti-science or eroding confidence in sort of research or scientific knowledge which again is an indirect attack on universities as well. So, all of those things I think are part and parcel of how universities are viewed in sort of this democratic backsliding Absolutely.

Robert Ascah: This plays out in part on Smith's critique of wokeism, cultural, cancel culture, and so on.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: Absolutely. And this whole notion that, there's a problem at universities because they're not allowing the full range of free speech, which in their view would allow for very extreme in some cases hate speech that targets minorities, etc. and you see it as well in her encouragement of harsh crackdowns on protests on campuses. She was quite pleased when the police went in and cleared the encampment at the University of Calgary and then encouraged similar actions in Edmonton as well.

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ELIZABETH SMYTHE: And so again, that's part and parcel of this attempt to limit the autonomy and the range of voices that can be heard in the university setting.

Robert Ascah: One of the areas that concerns me, and I mentioned this at the outset, is the whole consolidation of policing. And the government of Alberta has recently hired the former deputy commissioner of the RCMP to be Alberta's chief sheriff. We have the deputy of the executive council who was the former police chief in Edmonton and the power of

policing and what it's done. You mentioned encampments, there's the homeless encampments and that type of decision to be made which is being made by the provincial government although there's some fig leaf that it was actually universities or municipalities that were calling the shots. So what kinds of discussions did you have with your students?

Did this come up as a particular issue? Right.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: The policing not directly, although we did talk about the campus protests and I think there was an unease with the extent to which there is a centralization or an attempt to centralize this under the province and the extent to which there's been a militarization too of police which is not unique certainly to Alberta but is a trend in a number certainly across North America. So, they were uneasy I guess I would say with that whole trend so I mean a lot of things came up in terms of democratic backsliding.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: The other concern related to bill 20 and the attempt to again limit voices challenging the government coming from particular municipalities. You have the effort to make it easier for cabinet and again not one of the other characteristics of a backsliding government is to marginalize elected representative bodies. You saw that attempt in Bill with the Sovereignty Act where it was going to be cabinet not the Legislative Assembly that would determine whether certain laws were going to be deemed to be in violation of Alberta's sovereignty. And you see that with the ability it gives cabinet to initiate processes which could lead to the removal of elected counselors and also to be able to overturn or challenge laws that are seen to be in conflict with again provincial policies. And so that's another attempt to erode other representative democratic institutions that might pose a challenge to the provincial executive.

Robert Ascah: And we've seen this most recently with respect to the statement from the education minister with respect to these age inappropriate books and superseding the role of independent trustees to make those kinds of judgments and those kinds of policies.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: Absolutely. So, again, the provincial what they've said so far is they're just going to provide some guidelines and they're going to leave it up to the boards. But I think that's the thin edge of the wedge because they don't currently have legislative authority to ban books. You can see where this is going and I wouldn't be surprised in the fall session to see something beyond guidelines to see some sort of legislative authority and

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ELIZABETH SMYTHE: giving power to the minister to play that role. So I wouldn't be surprised at all.

Robert Ascah: Most recently there's Bill 5 which made some changes to referenda legislation plebiscites and that sort of thing. and most notably the time period for seeking a referendum or plebiscite was extended from 90 days to 120 and then the number for a provincial referendum was dropped from 20% to 10% and we now have the Republican Party of Alberta and the Prosperity Project and so on going out there beating the bushes to get signatures there. So that's another reflection of how a government can is it fair to say manipulate public opinion or guide public opinion or in effect it's this whole Overton window that ideas such as separatism which were largely dormant government after the national energy program or come back in and the government here is actively I think fanning the flames of separatist discontent particularly with their ongoing battles with Ottawa.

How does direct democracy which people like Ted Morton and others from the Calgary School; they put great store with state-side types of citizens' initiativea. Can you comment a little bit on

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: And let me put it in a little bit broader context. You use the word manipulate public opinion. We discussed tools of direct democracy with my students and I referred to it as the strategic use of referenda. I mean manipulate implies- but certainly governments have used this tool to advance certain of their own interests but any tool like a referenda can be used in a constructive way and they can be used in a very strategic or what you might call manipulative way. So somewhere like Switzerland that has a very strong tradition of direct democracy, they have a lot of referendums and they function fairly well. In contrast, if you looked at Poland or Hungary over the last few years, you would see referendums used deliberately in the case of both Poland and Hungary to target migrants to inflame public fear to persuade citizens to give the authoritarian regime more power and authority.

Authoritarian regimes really like referendums too and they use them in a very strategic, manipulative way. In the case of the initiatives they have been around for quite a long time in the United States and they're used only at the state level and again that the picture is kind of mixed. You have some cases where they seem to have functioned fairly well to reflect voices of citizens and to resolve in some case cases divisive issues or to change regulations in a way that seems to have been a legitimate reflection of citizens. But on the other hand, there are a lot of problems.

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ELIZABETH SMYTHE: One of them is with the nature of the playing field on which various sides of the referendum operate. in the case of Alberta, the new legislation will apply both

to recall and it will apply to ballot to initiatives and referendum. It will allow for more money into those campaigns and that can be a subject of concern.

With all those factors it can certainly be a way of mobilizing people around an issue that may be treated in a very simplistic way, raise unrealistic expectations or serve as an excuse for the executive to acquire more authority. So, it's ironic that on the one hand it's framed as a tool of direct democracy as a very positive thing in the case of Alberta for citizens to have a voice. On the other hand, it's quite clear that it's been used strategically as the premier herself admitted to possibly avoid a split in her own party. She was brutally frank I thought about the purposes and despite all her rhetoric about direct democracy and giving citizens a voice that she later admitted that wasn't what it was all about. There were other factors and one of them was her desire to hold on to the leadership and power within her party.

The other one is to use it in terms of leverage. And this is the narrative about if we only did Quebec and had two referendums, we'd have a lot more autonomy and sovereignty within Canada. And again, it's kind of a dangerous move because you might be unleashing forces that may lead you in another direction.

It's unclear whether she wants to go fully in the separatist direction. She certainly wants to whip up that rhetoric and that language both to placate the base of her party and I think probably to enhance what she sees as leverage with Ottawa with the Liberal government in Ottawa. Referenda they're tools and there's lots of cases where they've been used as part of a democratic backsliding agenda and not necessarily in a way that really enhances what we might call direct democracy.

The other thing I think important in Bill 54 is the undermining of elections and election related institutions. And you see that also in the efforts to throw doubt on our election process. And I noted the number of times that provincial ministers or the premier have used language about restoring trust in strengthening confidence in our elections. I finally contacted a reporter and I said, "Are you guys challenging the government on these assertions? Because if you do research, you'll find trust in electoral authorities in Canada is pretty high. And I give my students a lot of information on measures of electoral integrity."

These are cross-national measures done by research networks and Canada ranks at the top in electoral integrity and so the reporter she got back to me and said we've challenged them where's the evidence that there is this worry about trust in our elections she said they provided no evidence at all and they repeat this phrase over and over again in order to instill a concern that isn't there and then to answer the concern that isn't there with more measures that will make voices contrary to theirs harder to be heard which is around voter

suppression and around redrawing electoral boundaries in a way that will weaken the voices particularly in urban areas.

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of various communities. I think that's quite concerning as well as a part of that bill.

Robert Ascah: Just to sort of wrap up Elizabeth, one of the other concerns which is common among all societies that are struggling to improve democracy and prevent the backsliding is the issue of dark money or the ability of financed groups or individuals to have an oversized effect on the outcome of elections. Do you want to say anything else about that?

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: I think it's a real problem and I think again when you start to see executives pushing legislation that limits the autonomy of the election in the organizations institutions running elections. I think it's problematic and I think it was Alberta's electoral officer expressing concerns about shorter timelines for example to investigate violations. The move to allow corporate and union donations. Again, corporations, it's pretty easy to form a corporation in Alberta. It's pretty easy to form a numbered company that is totally untransparent which is an important value in a democracy. You can see the capacity there for all kinds of problems, never mind the external interference that we haven't even talked about in terms of misinformation, the extent to which other external entities be they the state or other groups or organizations particularly because of social media and technological changes. How much harder it is to police these electoral processes in terms of money. And then if you add to that a weakening of the capacity and resources of electoral authorities to deal with these problems, then you're really opening the door for more and more of these kinds of forms of dark money to have a role.

That's very dangerous in a democracy.

Robert Ascah: Elizabeth, thank you very much for your very eloquent and learned thoughts on democracy in Alberta in the current state. We shall see how things evolve particularly with the municipal elections coming this fall under the new rules as well as watching for the plebiscite or referendum on some kind of separation. So thank you again

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: I want to do one thing though and that is with my students. I don't end on a negative note, and I don't end on saying there's nothing to be done because there is lots to be done and I think the example of bill 18 where there was push back from the post-secondaries. I think in education we may see push back from the Alberta teachers. I end with a study from a Harvard political scientist that she did on civil resistance over about 120 years with thousands of cases and data. And she makes the case that civil resistance, if it is done right, has been quite successful and more successful than authorities would

lead you to think in terms of pushing back against democratic backsliding and more and more authoritarian regimes and centralizing power in an executive. So, I think there's lots to be done in terms of all of us resisting,

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challenging and exposing these measures and what their implications are for democracy in Alberta.

Robert Ascah: Thank you, Liz, very much.

ELIZABETH SMYTHE: You're most welcome. It was fun.

Meeting ended after 00:45:36 🙌

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