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Former ambassador Paul Heinbecker on democracy around the world

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CBC.ca welcomed Paul Heinbecker to our live chats on Jan. 12 as part of our [Democracy Project](#), in conjunction with CBC Radio's [Dispatches](#).

Heinbecker is a former Canadian ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations, and a former ambassador to Germany.

He is now director of the Centre for Global Relations, Governance, and Policy at Wilfrid Laurier University, and a distinguished fellow of international relations at the Centre for International Governance Innovation.

Heinbecker took your questions on the challenges democracy faces around the world, and what happens when democracy has unforeseen consequences.

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Chat Questions (8)

Derrick

Russia and the United States regularly interfere in other countries' elections by funding certain parties or coalitions and by threatening to withhold aid if the citizens of that particular country vote for a candidate that the US is opposed to. (Such as Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega.) Is this legal? How can this blackmail be possibly justified if the US in particular wants to spread democracy? Does Canada participate in this kind of anti-democratic behaviour?

Paul Heinbecker: I don't know the answer to that question. The US, directly and very often indirectly, funds pro-democracy actions.

For example, there's something called the National Democratic Institute that the office often uses to inject funds to support the democratic process and I know that's not illegal.

Canada does a little of the same. CIDA seeks to fund democracy-promoting organizations and may assist governments in promoting it and carrying out elections, but I don't think it's illegal. But CIDA doesn't do it on a partisan basis, so it's not illegal or even improper.

Cameron



Paul Heinbecker

Sudbury

Why is it that since 9/11 we continually lose our freedoms in return for security. The media only throws fuel on the fire by not reporting the whole truth. I am no conspiracy theorist. My question is simple. Since 9/11 our freedoms have been encroached upon and we seem to be headed for deeper integration with the U.S. how can this possibly help Canadians?

Paul Heinbecker: One of the casualties of 9/11 is the American reputation for human rights and democracy leadership around the world. By declaring a war on terror, by conflating it with the middle east crisis between the Israelis and the Palestinians, by using draconian measures domestically to arrest and hold people on flimsy evidence and creating Guantanamo, Americans have taken a number of steps that deny or diminish the rights of American citizens and others caught up in the net, such as Maher Arar.

In Canada, we have the minister's certificates by which we hold foreigners without trial, which is profoundly undemocratic.

Jim Cook

Does President Bush actually believe Iraq is ready for western style democracy? Would you discuss the notion that democracy in Iraq will simply provide Kurds and Shiites (oppressed under Saddam) the opportunity to take revenge on the Sunni minority and, as a result, that minority will continue the current cycle of violence and de-stabilization.

Thank you.

Paul Heinbecker: Bush evidently believes that Iraq is ready for Western-style democracy, although not many other people do. Even Bush has been forced to temper his aspirations and what he's looking for now is just stability.

Although in his speech the other night he did mention that democracy is the best way to safeguard American security. The problem is that there's much more to Democracy than an election and it takes decades and generations, if not centuries for a country to become democratic and respect the minorities.

If elections are held prematurely, they simply lock in power structures that tend to oppress minorities. For example, after the first election in Bulgaria following the breakdown of Communism, the majority party decided to expel the minority Turks to Turkey.

The problem in Iraq was the Shia having suffered so much under a Sunni majority may not be able resist the temptation to settle accounts.

Faiz Lalani

A few weeks ago I found myself dumbfounded as I couldn't refute my father's simple argument: Non-Western countries need authoritarian rulers to guide them through development--in essence, development is incompatible with democracy. All the political theory that I've absorbed over the years couldn't shelter me from the lack of empirical proof of successful developing democracy. Singapore, Malaysia, (maybe) Indonesia, Taiwan, South Korea and fast rising China all exemplify efficient developing or developed nations that have or had authoritarian leadership. I counter-argued with the Indian example, but in truth India suffers from a deficit of leadership and may take decades before it reaches the economic ascendancy that China now enjoys. How can I challenge my father's thesis?

Paul Heinbecker: I guess the argument I would make is that non-Western countries are not inferior to Western countries. You could pick examples like India, Argentina, Turkey, any number of countries where there's been development and democracy. It's true that it has been the case in places like Malaysia.

It certainly is a democracy, although it's not as complete a democracy. It raises the question of what democracy is. Some countries, like the Iranians, they have a kind of a democracy.

There are many countries in the world that are in varying stages of democratic development and economic development and in some cases there are places like Korea that were authoritarian before they were democratic but what seems to be important is that the rule of law be inculcated in the society than simple majority elections, but the rule of law is integral to a functioning democracy. In some respects, good governance is the objective, which is not the same thing as simple democratic governance. There are many examples of third-world countries that are developing, or are already developed, such as Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Turkey, India, I suppose Malaysia.

There's not one model, or only one path to development, but repression and authoritarianism, is clearly the antithesis of democracy and is not leading to economic growth.

Dan

Ottawa

Having recently returned to Canada after living abroad for some time I have been struck by the prevailing notion that freedom and democracy alone equate to the quality of life we enjoy in our first world country. Yet we see in the fast developing countries around the world that non-democratic nations, and even those that practice a different flavour of democracy than we do here, are improving the quality of life for its citizens. Is it a myth that democracy paves the road to a better future? Are there some basic elements of a democracy that are more important than others?

Paul Heinbecker: No, the clearest example of that is Japan, where the Japanese have had elected single-party rule since the war and have raised the standard of living, the quality of lives, literacy, health expectations enormously.

Singapore is a kind of autocratic democracy where the leadership is elected but it's a fairly controlled process. The problem of trying to draw parallels to Singapore is that it's a very small state so you can't extrapolate that example when it's about the same size as Toronto.

There is also the definition issue of what's a Western-style democracy. The US has democracy, we have a different style, Germany and the Scandinavians. What is a Western-style democracy?

Democracies always reflect the cultures they come from which is why it's hard to impose them on others.

Moby Preek

Alberta

Why wasn't the democratic will of the people of Palestine honoured by the democratic world and why is a coup or coups honoured by the same democratic world. Do we need adjectives to modify Democracy?

Paul Heinbecker: Double standards. The problem It is ironic that the west insisted on elections in the Palestinian territory then did not like the outcome and refused to deal with what the people had freely chosen.

That does not diminish the fact that Hamas has a record of terrorist activities that obviously have discouraged Western countries from accepting them or wishing to deal with them.

There are two answers, one is legal, one is political.

The legal answer is that recognition is not a bestowal of acceptability. Recognition under the law is acknowledging a fact. The question for the law is who has control of the territory and many countries now recognize countries rather than government, rather than recognize the question of whether those who have put themselves in charge have done it in an acceptable manner or not.

Political dimension of that is that there are times when the government that's been elected is too bad, too evil, too dangerous. There are times when governments come to office through coups where their behavior is simply unacceptable so they are not recognized, but there are other cases where countries believe it may be in their best interests to recognize them even if they came into office in a non-democratic fashion.

Martin Caldwell

In your opinion, when one speaks of the spread of western style democracy around the world, is that inevitably tied to capitalism and "the American way" of free market corporate rule? - and if so, it seems to me that one would have to be a hypocrite to suggest that this system is better than any other. All forms of governance have their inherent challenges, whether they are human rights abuses or poverty or the struggle for healthy living (water, food and health care). It would make sense to me that any government, American, Canadian or other would be wise to tackle the issues that are challenging the 'western style democracy' and make it a system that is truly worth spreading. If that were the case, perhaps there wouldn't be so much resistance from nations that are subject to this forced medicine approach such as the one in Iraq. Right now, the western style democracy message appears to be 'this system is better because we know it and we use it - therefore its better'. Not a terribly convincing argument - wouldn't you agree?

Paul Heinbecker: No. Democracy and free markets certainly are not unrelated to each other but that's a different thing than corporate rule. Corporate rule is more related to fascism. It's the case that some corporations have enormous power and can influence less powerful governments, but it is also the case that those governments can, and do, get rid of those corporations they don't like.

There are 60 countries that Freedom House considers to be democracy. Free enterprise is part of a free society, but there is no democracy in which enterprise is totally unregulated.

REED SCIVENER

SIMCOE,ONTARIO

I BELIEVE THAT IN ORDER TO INSTILL A DEMOCRACY INTO A NATION THAT THE DESIRE HAS TO COME FROM THE BOTTOM UP, FROM THE MASSES OF FOLK, IF YOU WILL. NOT FORCING IT ON THEM FROM THE TOP DOWN BY A FEW POLITICAL ELITE WITH THE HELP OF A FOREIGN COUNTRY. DO YOU AGREE?

Paul Heinbecker: I mostly agree. As someone says, "It's a little like love, it's got to come from the soul."

There are cases where democracy has come from the top down, notably in Asia and particularly in Japan.

Closing thoughts

There seems to be steady progress towards democracy in the world. There are 60 countries considered democratic, and another 60 are developing it. Two-thirds of the world is considered democratic or in the process of democratizing.

Democracy is more than just elections. It requires respect for minority rights, it requires the rule of law, free markets. The UN has done an enormous amount to assist in that process. It has supervised nearly 100 elections around the world and has actively assisted scores of countries as they try to become democracies.