

In the End, Who Represents Who?

ARNALDO MADEIRA

NATIONS go through highs and lows in relation to matters of ethics and moral values. There are times of optimism and credibility in the institutions and among citizens, particularly in political leadership. Brazil, today, is going through a generalized phase of disbelief. Studies show that individuals don't believe in each other. The principal State institutions are outdated in public opinion, as shown in the opinions that they express, here and there, about the workings of Justice and the practices adopted in Parliament.

Let's take a look at Federal Parliament at the present time. It is not that there have not been prior periods with many critics and lack of tuning between so-called public opinion and Congress. However, we have never had so broad a public, so well informed and with the possibilities for access to the processes of legislative decisions as we do today. I am speaking of the broadcasters (TV and radio) of the Parliament itself, of access to the internet, of the revolution in information technology and communication that reaches us all.

It is within this scenario that I want to analyze the Chamber of Deputies. And to not deal only with the responsibilities of the present government, although he has enthusiastically contributed to the aggravation of the degenerate practices currently in place.

Roberto Campos, whose intellectual competence and sarcasm is known to everyone, has said that Brasilia, more specifically the National Congress, was a "bazaar of illusions," a "deficit factory." He was right. And what he affirmed, in the 1990s, or well before, continues to the present. There, more specifically in the Chamber, the Executive rules the roost. It creates permanent expenses in an irresponsible manner, shamelessly insists on prevailing (worse than it could), solemnly ignores constitutional rules that should guide its issuance of provisional measures, etc. And the majority of our representatives – for their own convenience – endorse initiatives that should in no manner ever be endorsed. With respect to citizens. With respect to the institution itself of which they are a part.

For lack of better justifications for the unjustifiable, the option almost always adopted by the Congress is the easy road of populist discourse. It is not a small number of representatives that takes the podium and shouts to the corporate galleries: "This House does what the people want!" It would be more correct if they were to say "This House, indeed, has done what the government wants. And what the various corporations expect." What the lobbies want could be good for

the interests that they represent – often, legitimately, it has to be said. But it is not always good for the country.

It is never too late to remember that the “bazaar of illusions” and that “deficit factory” Roberto Campos alluded to must bring benefits to those who support them and make them feasible. Otherwise, they would not be increasing. Now, in electoral terms and in spite of the loud drumbeating of so many in favor of corporations, a tragedy has been revealed, as demonstrated in the turnover indices (from 40% to 60%). Half of the federal deputies that have stood for reelection were unsuccessful at the ballot box. In the Legislative Assemblies and Municipal Chambers it is not much different. Well, if so much and such constant turnover were such a good thing, Parliament would be perceived differently than it is today.

Once in a while things become a little complicated for the Executive. The governing base in the Chamber rebels in an attempt to gain some advantage – release of funds for its amendments to the budget, for example – in exchange for its favorable vote for the interests of the Executive. Nothing, so to speak, that the presidential pen or the *Official Daily* can't handle. And to be clear: the governmental base says, indeed, with the support of sectors of the opposition. Even more, when it is the creation of public jobs that is at stake, or increase of salaries, everyone then wants to be in good terms with the different corporations. After all, from time to time we have elections. The leaks from public accounts – this is the recurrent rationalization – that is for the next government to resolve. And for society to pay.

This irresponsible “generosity” with other's money is neither exclusively from the Federal Chamber nor the Senate. It goes beyond all of the Legislative branch, which has increasingly become an appendage of the Executive and, for that reason, irrelevant. It is evident that such submissiveness does not happen by accident. It derives from a series of factors: from the lack of awareness (or disrespect) on the part of some legislators of their institutional role to the merely personal interests of so many others. From the omission of the parties, that have little importance in national life through discourse, practice and incoherence. Of the Brazilian hatred for dissent, that so much mediocrity produces. From lack of courage to innovate, change what needs to be changed – beginning with the system of parliamentary representation that is in place: the proportional vote system in an open list.

Parliament is only diminished because it allowed itself to be diminished, because it lacked respect for itself. In the end, for example, no one is obliged to act contrary to ethics.

But there is also no question that our system of parliamentary representation is responsible for so much. In truth, the majority of people don't know that they have voted for someone and contributed to the election of an unknown who is from another party and with whom they would never have an affinity. The majority of citizens do not feel represented in Parliament. Days after the elections they can no longer remember the name of their candidate. What are they going to charge, and from whom? The elected, in turn, feel free to promise much, always, not to inform the voters and, in the subsequent elections, to look for votes where it is the most

convenient.

Who is going to demand coherence from the deputies?

Are we going to continue, in general, ignoring the fact that we have elections but we do not have representation? It is true that a good part of the deputies are elected by region almost as if it were an informal practice of district voting. But these same deputies do not stop campaigning for votes in the various places from its region. Especially in metropolitan regions. And, thus, the voter is unable to assimilate the idea of representation and much less to practice citizenship.

I am favorable to the so-called majority district vote for the election of deputies and councilmen, from the understanding that this is a system easily comprehended by voters, strengthens the parties, reduces the cost of elections and, importantly, creates ties between representatives and the represented. I have presented to the Chamber a Proposal for a Constitutional Amendment in this sense. There are other similar initiatives, all with the objective of bringing representatives and the represented closer together. But unfortunately, political reform that is in the interest of the country has been – and not only today – postponed in favor of mundane, superficial concerns, when they are not merely sophistic. No one thinks of discussing the democratic principle of “one citizen, one vote.” It is an unpardonable sin.

Thus, in order to facilitate the possible proceeding of the Proposal for the Amendment to the Constitution (PEC) which I presented, each unit of the Federation is divided into electoral districts in equal number to the chairs to which they have claim in the Legislature. An example: the São Paulo State has 70 seats in the Federal Chamber. Therefore 70 districts will be created, with approximately the same number of voters. Each party can offer only one candidate per district which, in turn, can elect only a single representative – the one who receives the largest number of votes from the district. The one who is elected would represent all the voters of the district - and have to respond to them.

However, there is no perfect election system, and there is absolutely nothing that is not subject to constant improvement. It is not for this that we are obliged to choose for the worst, as we had tried recently to do in the Chamber by establishing voting by secret ballot – a system that replaces the will of the voters by the party leaders who would, practically speaking, determine who would or would not be elected.

Critics of the majority district vote for parliamentary elections commonly ascribe a series of “limitations:”

1) Some allege that it will transform deputies in federal and state councilmen, which will transform Parliament into a retreat where only narrow, parochial interests will be discussed. In my view this argument is without substance. What do we have today? Leaving aside the exceptions that prove the rule, either the deputy of a specific region is sought to consider budgetary amendments, in order to guarantee some works, or, instead, he is at the service of corporate interests.

It is no accident that discussions about the major problems of the nation have been, for some time, absent from the convenings of the Chamber of Deputies. There the debate is, as stated, forbidden. Either you are in favor of the workers or you are

against. Either you are in favor of Brazil or you want to see its failure. If this is the problem, it is summed up thusly: the “parochial interests” are already represented in Brasilia and in the Legislative Assemblies.

There is considerable preconception and misinformation in this argument – to which a representational district is consigned to parochial thinking. What would be said of Margaret Thatcher? And of Winston Churchill? Both were elected by district vote.

2) Others say that the majority district vote will prevent the representation of minorities in the legislative houses. It is curious that no one stands in defense of the majority of citizens, who live in the major cities and metropolitan regions and who are under-represented in Parliament. Well, what prevents the representative of an electoral district from being sensitive to causes, since they are fair, of a specific minority? Is it necessary to be a bank employee, for example to defend positions that would be in the interests of all workers? Is a heterosexual, in turn, prevented from fighting for all human beings to be equally respected – independent of gender, color, social class, religious belief or sexual preference?

3) There are also those who argue that majority district vote could bring about frightful injustices. According to them, a specific party could gain second place in all of the districts, reach a limit of 49% of the votes and have no representative in the Federal Chamber, in the Legislative Assemblies and the Municipal Chambers. Is it possible? It is. But it is improbable that this could occur. Successful experiences in other countries do not endorse this thesis. What they reveal is that governance through district vote is much better.

To summarize:

1) The system of parliamentary representation that we have no longer serves us – and has not for some time.

2) Altering it is something complex, which requires mobilization of the press and public opinion around a subject that does not provoke much emotion.

What should be done? Give up? No, clearly not.

The way out is to continue debating with society, defending ideas, in the certainty that – even if only for the electoral survival of its members – the Parliament will have, sooner or later, to promote political reform in the interests of the nation.

Therefore, on to the debate.

Arnaldo Madeira is federal deputy for PSDB-SP. @ – dep.arnaldomadeira@uol.com.br

Received on 9.15.2009 and accepted on 9.18.2009.

Translated by Cary Wasserman and Valéria Wasserman. The original in Portuguese is available at http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_issuetoc&pid=0103-401420090003&lng=pt&nrm=iso.