

Your Vancouver Sun

Let's save referendums for the big issues, not the aquarium's future

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When the Vancouver park board earlier this year rescinded a decade-old resolution that would have forced the city to hold a referendum on expansion of the Vancouver Aquarium, and on whether to allow sea creatures to be held in captivity, it was upholding the principles of Canadian democracy.

We elect people to govern. They are given the authority to make decisions on our behalf. This is called representative democracy and it is the essence of our political culture.

Referendums are rarely used in Canada. When they are, they address big picture issues: Electoral reforms such as the single transferable vote in British Columbia last year; constitutional changes as in the Charlottetown accord of 1992; withdrawal from Confederation as in the Quebec referendums of 1980 and 1995; and, reaching back into history, prohibition and conscription.

The referendum has been a favourite tool of fascists to legitimize their repressive policies. Both Hitler and Mussolini used them to undermine democracy. Historians argue that referendums would have retained slavery in the United States, denied women the vote and kept homosexual activity illegal.

It is evident that critics of the Vancouver Aquarium, who would like to see it dismantled, the animals on display freed and the land restored to rain forest, want a referendum. They know full well that activists passionately fighting for the rights of flora and fauna will mobilize to defeat development. Unfortunately, the million people a year who visit the aquarium likely lack the same zeal to save this important educational and entertaining institution in Stanley Park, even though polling since 1991 shows increasing support for it.

One of the two referendums the Coalition of Progressive Electors and animal rights activists are pressing for would ask Vancouverites whether they are in favour of phasing out the containment of whales and dolphins in Stanley Park. The loaded question was scheduled to be posed in 2008 as part of the civic election, which would have delayed completion of the expansion until after the Olympics in 2010.

But timing isn't the main reason to oppose referendums on the aquarium. Parks board commissioner Marty Zlotnik got it exactly right when he urged that the referendum motions be reversed. "Referendums are not what governments get elected to do; governments get elected to make decisions," he said. "The public has a referendum, and that's called an election."

This is the crux of the matter. A referendum is the coward's way out. It is an abrogation of responsibility. City councillors, school trustees and park board commissioners are given the task of carefully weighing all the facts of often complex issues and making decisions that best serve the public interest.

A referendum is a crude implement to express the public will. The addition of a third option, for instance, divides opinion so that a clear majority may not emerge. Yet most matters of governance require a more nuanced response than Yes or No.

At the same time, many civic issues are of such a mundane and routine nature that a referendum is a hopelessly inefficient way of dealing with them. Are we to have a referendum on which days garbage is picked up, the date the pools open or the time libraries close?

Let's save the referendum for those rare occasions when the future of the country is at stake.

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Park board's first obligation is to protect parkland

Letter

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Re: Aquarium's plans to expand are awash in park board baffle, Editorial, Sept. 13

The aquarium is a valuable part of Vancouver, and we all want to see it prosper. At the same time, the people of Vancouver also want their elected park board commissioners to ensure fair and transparent processes in decision-making. Commissioners are trustees of public land first, protecting our parklands for current and future generations, before advocating for any institutions that are tenants within our parklands.

The consultation process and its various components for the expansion of the aquarium, as designed by the aquarium's public relations firm, were flawed. Not only was the process "slick," to quote Commissioner Allan de Genova, but the discussion document brochure and its various feedback questions were poorly designed and biased in favour of the expansion.

This consultation process replaced a motion passed by a previous Non-Partisan Association park board in 1995 that required any aquarium expansion outside its current footprint to be taken to the people of Vancouver through referenda. The current majority NPA park board overturned this obligation, which made it even more important that the consultation process be fair and unbiased so we could hear what Vancouverites really wanted. Unfortunately, the process was not.

Keep in mind that the vote distancing the board from this flawed process was 5 to 1, with NPA, Coalition of Progressive Electors and independent commissioners in agreement.

Loretta Woodcock

Commissioner

Vancouver Board of Parks & Recreation
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