Democracy and You – Part Three

In part two of this series on Democracy, readers were challenged to do a bit of self-examination, to consider their opinion on "things that matter" with the goal of identifying their political leanings. How you answer questions on issues such as: voting, immigration, abortion, national defense, gun control, racial relations, education, freedom of speech, all in the aggregate will reveal to you—and to others if you discuss such matters with them—where you stand on the political spectrum.

The previous essay also recommended to readers who may not recognize their political leanings that there are questionnaires available on the Internet to help sort themselves out. One such website is run by the highly respected Pew Research Center (pewresearch.org). Called the Political Typology Quiz, the questionnaire asks just sixteen (16) questions, and then ranks the individual within a group along a spectrum. The groups are identified as: Progressive Left, Establishment Liberals, Democratic Mainstays, Outsider Left, Stressed Sideliners, Ambivalent Right, Populist Right, Committed Conservatives, and Faith and Flag Conservatives.

Taking the Pew quiz is likely traumatic for some. Imagine completing the quiz only to find out you've been playing for the wrong team all these years? If you have friends and family with whom you have had conversations about important issues, you can probably guess about where they fall on the spectrum. (This leads to a theory that people do not register with a major political party for fear of people concluding that their political views match their party.) So what? Are you ashamed of those views? You want to be a hermit?; find a cave. A friend spoke of his non-committal, uninvolved, whiny neighbor who took the quiz to discover—no surprise—that he fell into the category of "stressed sideliner". When you come across someone who claims to be "independent" (not to be confused with *unaffiliated*), you're probably talking to a stressed sideliner. Another claimed to side neither with Democrats nor Republicans. Okay. But taking the quiz revealed him to not be as neutral as he thought.

There has been much talk in the last few years about how our society has become "polarized", with extreme positions causing stress when the two factions come into proximity. There have always been people who are "hot-headed" or intolerant to the point of being belligerent, or worse. Such people, when words fail to persuade, repeat the same words, only louder. So far as I can tell, we remain a civilized society most of the time, and we tend to avoid conflict if we can help it, although holiday get-togethers with in-laws can sometimes tax the equanimity of even the most patient of souls. The word *rhetoric,* which is the art of persuasive speaking and writing, fell into disfavor back in the 1960's; not sure why. We use rhetoric all the time, though perhaps some of us are out of practice. The ancient Greeks and Romans, when they weren't hacking each other to pieces, made rhetoric high art, and skillfully used it to change people's minds. Not so long ago, it was taught in our schools. Perhaps it can still be effective today, if we can get people to take time to listen?

If we are to remain a democracy, we need to remind those who think differently that every once in a while, having a choice of who we wish to have write our laws and execute them, is a good thing. The alternatives are such things as *autocracy* – "rule by one, with absolute power", or *totalitarianism* – "government with total control over its citizens". And we really don't want that, do we?