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# OPINION...

## Democracy Held Hostage

In the course of the current election, little attention has been paid to the controversial issue of patronage in New Brunswick politics. The two traditional parties, the Progressive Conservatives and the Liberals, seem determined to maintain the *status quo*. Patronage, they argue, is an inherent part of the political process and it should continue to be so. Only the New Democratic Party has stated that they intend to do away with a system based on favoritism and privilege rather than merit. Considering the opposing viewpoints, does patronage best serve the interests of New Brunswick's citizens?

Certainly patronage exists. Jean Gauvin's record as Fisheries Minister is a good case in point. One only has to recall the numerous grants and loans allotted to Gauvin's party faithfuls as evidence. It would be unfair to single out ex Fisheries Minister Gauvin as the Department of Transportation also stands guilty of the patronage charge. A few weeks ago, the owner of a small gravel company lamented that he had received very few contracts during the course of the campaign. ("If I'm not getting any contracts now, what will it be like after the election?"). His statement exemplifies the pervasiveness of patronage in the shaping of the economy, as does the UNB student who hopes Hatfield will be re-elected so she will be guaranteed her summer job. (*Brunswickan*, Sept. 23, p.20).

When I moved to New Brunswick in July, I was shocked to hear blatant examples of patronage bantered about in casual conversations. But what is perhaps most frightening is the complacency that greets the issue. People just shrug their shoulders--either they do not care or they simply accept it as normal.

Do New Brunswickers not see the nefarious ramifications of patronage? I forward the argument that patronage is a twentieth century form of feudalism. Groups/individuals extend loyalty to their lord/political representative in exchange for economic favour. They pay tribute and are rewarded for their obedience.

This system of benign paternalism is detrimental to the political and economic development of the province. Rarely will individuals challenge the status quo if they feel threatened or intimidated. Thus, innovative sorts may be reluctant to forward new ideas or opinions if confronted by a stone wall of opposition. Who dares bite the hand that feeds you?

Conversely, when people come to rely upon government handouts they become complacent, smug and lazy. The very nature of patronage stifles initiative and subverts the entrepreneurial spirit. Why should an individual work like a dog when he is guaranteed a handout?

In concluding, I suggest that government should consider an individual's application on basis of merit rather than party allegiance. Canada is, supposedly, a democratic country. Individuals are, supposedly, to be treated equally and fairly. As things stand now, this cannot be the case in New Brunswick. I welcome further comment on this matter.

KAREN SKINNER