

THE CALGARY STAMPEDE AND DEMOCRATIC VIRTUE

John von Heyking

Research Associate

Research Unit for the Study of Civil Society

University of Calgary

Every July, the spirit moves Calgarians to jingle their spurs and to remind themselves that life does not always move according to the rhythms of the marketplace and of the freeways. When most Calgarians think of the Stampede, they think of going to the Stampede grounds to take in the rodeo and amusements, or they think of getting liquored up for ten straight days at bars and office parties. But our thoughts concerning the Stampede need not stop here; further reflection on the festival can give us helpful insights about our political culture. Like festivals in other cultures, the Stampede celebrates important cultural, moral, and political principles. Specifically, it celebrates virtues such as heroism while simultaneously affirming the democratic and pluralistic principle of equality. Heroism, or “leadership,” is not easily reconciled with equality. Indeed, Preston Manning recently lamented Brian Mulroney’s lack of humility, which reflects his view and that of others that political leaders should exhibit humility. But how? At a time when Canadians are anxious about their lack of common principles and traditions, the Stampede celebrates salutary moral and political principles of which Albertans are proud and to which they continuously aspire.

Politics and the Stampede usually make uneasy bedfellows. Visits by the Prime Minister are seen as pathetic and fruitless attempts to court Western voters. The Stampede also attracts a few animal-rights activists who complain about alleged mistreatment of animals. Aboriginals,

often with justification, express concern that planned Stampede festivities emphasize the glory of the white cowboy at the expense of their own rich heritage. However, failure in practice does not, in this case, indicate that the guiding principles of this practice are themselves deficient.

The political significance of the Stampede should not be surprising to those familiar with the civic function of festivals. In a recent essay titled, “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition,” Montreal intellectual Charles Taylor argues that festivals are an important expression of the ideals and values of the citizens. In ancient Greece, Athenian citizens would attend tragedies as a way of expressing their citizenship because those tragedies expressed their common belief that wisdom is gained through suffering. The Athenians viewed their athletic competitions as revealing the strongest and those favored by the gods, and such people composed the aristocracy.

Taylor admires civic festivals but, in the spirit of Manning’s comment about Mulroney, he rejects the elitist implications of the ancient Greek example. Instead, he invokes the authority of an eighteenth-century French intellectual, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who pointed out that the content of a festival is immaterial so long as there is equality between the competitors and the spectators. For Rousseau and for Taylor, what matters is that competitors and spectators are equal; what they actually do to celebrate their equality does not matter. All that matters is that the festival expresses the identity of the collective; by contrast, individual achievement matters little.

At this point, the Calgarian might say, “whoa.” The Calgarian might be concerned that Taylor and Rousseau have placed the Stampede on the same level as other Canadian festivals such as the Montreal Jazz Festival or, worse, the Edmonton Klondike Days. Without taking away anything from these festivals, one might grant that the upset Calgarian has reason to be

concerned. For, it seems that the content of the festival does matter. Contrary to Taylor and Rousseau, the preservation of equality is not the only important consideration. The expression and recognition of exemplary virtue also matters. How, then, to reconcile virtue and equality?

The Stampede is a fitting festival for a democratic society because it celebrates both virtue and equality. Sometimes, the two do not harmonize; for inequality arises when some people are more virtuous than others. Some are more willing to act courageously, honestly, and so forth. However, the Stampede manages to celebrate the fact that all people have the potential to be virtuous. A pleasant afternoon at the rodeo is enough to see why.

Despite the glorification of the cowboy in the media, one quickly sees when one watches the rodeo that the cowboy is anything but glorified. The cowboy is but a partner with his bronco or bull, and a cowboy is always up-front about how much luck had to do with his performance. Luck or fortune appears to be a key element of the Stampede festival. The cowboy tries his luck at getting a tough (but not too tough) animal to ride, and the spectators provide witness to his luck. As Southern Alberta singer and rancher Ian Tyson sings in his song about the glorious chuckwagon races, “they cast their fate to the figure eight and the half a mile of hell.” Like the ancient Greek heroes such as Odysseus, modern cowboys can be said to seek the favor of the gods by casting their fate in rodeo events. This “favor of the gods” is expressed in whether they find success at their big gamble. This phrase does not signify gambling in the Las Vegas sense of the term; nor should it be taken too literally as if the participants were seeking temporal goods from pagan gods. Instead, the phrase signifies the awareness that one is never completely responsible for one’s virtue and one’s success.

Unlike the heroes of ancient Greece, the cowboys at the Stampede recognize that their ability to shine is fleeting and may be snatched away at any moment. Their condition resembles

a Christian who, in fear and trembling, remains unsure whether God will save or damn him. As St. Augustine said, “Love and do what you will.” Their virtue in being good cowboys is evidenced by their ability to hang onto the beast or to drive their chuckwagon skillfully, but they cannot take too much credit. Thus, the eight-second ride and the half a mile of hell promise “redemption” for those who are willing to risk it. Cowboys know this aspect of the rodeo quite well. As Calgarian Tom Phillips sings in his self-styled “metaphysical” song, “sometimes I feel I’m livin’ in a rodeo.” Calgarians don’t need to much to remind them that the rodeo is a rich allegory for the drama of humanity.

What does all this have to do with citizenship? Performers and spectators at the Stampede constitute partners in witnessing certain truths that bear on citizenship and on the deeper mysteries of our existence. Both the Stampede and our liberal democracy recognize virtue but both affirm human equality: the former by recognizing the frailty of the cowboy’s ability to win, and the latter by guaranteeing everyone equality of opportunity and, through it, the frailty of a citizen’s ability to succeed. The Stampede also expresses religious truths recognizable to people from diverse faiths and cultures, and thus fosters democratic pluralism. To “cast one’s fate” in the hope of gaining favor of the gods (or God) is common to many faiths including various aboriginal religions, Eastern religions, and Christianity. Christianity offers what political philosopher Eric Voegelin calls a “differentiated” version of this theme with its drama of Fall and Resurrection. The Christian does not, strictly speaking, cast his fate. Instead, he asks for forgiveness and redemption in a way that has been characterized as a “leap of faith.”

The “leap of faith” is followed by a kind of purification recognized by diverse religious and cultural traditions that possess stories of heroes and pilgrims engaged in rituals of purification. Further, the experience of purification is not merely individual, but also forges deep friendships and community. In a short-story called “Genesis,” Pulitzer Prize winner Wallace Stegner (whose family farmed in southwestern Saskatchewan) wrote about a group of cowboys who care for a herd of cattle in the infamous winter of 1906. They lose many head of cattle and they nearly freeze to death. Their struggle to survive their descent into the cold hell requires them to help each other, and in helping each other they grow closer as a community. Their heroic and self-sacrificing deeds forge their friendships. Yet, no one deserves or claims special recognition. Stegner explains why: “because it was what any of them would have done. To have done less would have been cowardice and disgrace. It was probably a step in the making of a cowhand when he learned that what would pass for heroics in a softer world was only chores around here.”

The Stampede celebrates the virtue gained through suffering, and it affirms the community ties forged in these common experiences. It promotes civic virtue because it reminds us of the common experiences that we share as human beings, and it highlights experiences especially familiar to Albertans. It also raises us beyond ourselves because it provides an exemplar of excellence to which we can aspire. Finally, the Stampede, like Stegner’s story, reminds us that aspiring to such an exemplar must be our normal way of acting. Bragging and demanding special recognition for doing our chores is unseemly, and ultimately undemocratic.