

# Toktok Talkie

by Joh Henschel



## Bees do it

We may think of democracy to be an advanced human trait. It harnesses multiple brains and is clearly a superior method of coming to good decisions. An issue requiring decision is opened for discussion in a group with common interest, various solutions are tabled, compared and debated, and a decision is finally reached with a quorum of votes, respected and accepted by everyone. A frustration for some may be that democracy is time-consuming, pays scant tribute to egos or vested interests, and largely disempowers leaders. Perhaps that is why human societies often cannot do democracy well. Bees do it. Well!

As every Namib toktokkie knows, bees are insects, and insects only have tiny brains. Maybe having many tiny brains has something to do with being good at democracy. The bee queen may be important, but she does not rule the hive. She lays eggs and keeps the swarm together. Individual workers know how to go about their various tasks of constructing, maintaining, air-conditioning, replenishing and defending the hive. A bee hive is a functional marvel of society, as expressed by William Shakespeare: “for so work the honeybees, creatures that by a rule in nature teach the act of order to a peopled kingdom”.

When a hive outgrows its home, the bee society splits, and some 12,000 bees leave for a new home, taking along their old queen, while a new queen becomes top-bee of the remaining residents. The departing swarm forms a “bee beard” hanging on a branch, and it remains in this vulnerable state until it has found a suitable new home where the hive can develop safely away from honey-thieves and parasites, protected from climatic extremes, and with sufficient space for honey and sizable crèches. Some three-hundred bee scouts go out to search and assess prospective homes, which may be anything up to ten kilometres away, then return to the swarm to tell the others about their quality and precise locations. They communicate by waggle-dancing, which fellow bees follow attentively. Many individual dancers tell contesting stories about different places, up to 20. The best account wins most recruits, who go out to the place to see for themselves. Upon their return, they dance enthusiastically, telling about the place, but only if it gets their support. This recruits more support. The process continues until there is a quorum of votes for one place. At that instant, a chorus of piping songs signal the end of the debate. Now, all scouts agree on that one place, whether or not they had voted for it. Then they tell the entire swarm about it. The queen, who did not participate at all in the decision-making process, and her entire entourage follow the scouts to the most agreeable home.

*Zophosis moralesi* marvels at the virtues of democracy so skilfully applied by humanity’s greatest friend among the insects. Let poets become politicians and heed George Bernard Shaw: “go to the bee, though poet, consider her ways and be wise”.

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