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Identity Politics¹

There is a popular myth that people vote based on a party's platform or the capability of a candidate. Study after study of voter behaviour over many years has show this just isn't so. Voters don't vote rationally like that. In fact, key election issues tend to be too complex and evolving for voters to understand them, let alone the solutions that might be offered by opposing candidates. Just ask Kim Campbell!

After decades of study in this area noted political scholar and Nobel economist Daniel Kahneman recently commented to the New York Times that, "The fashion of political writing ... is to suggest that people choose their candidate by their stand on the issues, but this strikes me as highly implausible."

In contrast, what appears to happen is that voters vote subjectively for the candidate who is seen to be most like them as a proxy for assuring themselves how a candidate might vote in the future. Ronald Reagan, for instance, was so successful at pitching man over platform that people voted for him even though they disagreed with his policies.

Ms. Payne's observation that politicians are "masters at using what they perceive as our differences to wedge us apart" just underscores this point. By emphasizing differences, politicians and political parties explicitly attempt to connect themselves to various groups in society. Given that the largest single group of voters has a family and a modest income, it's no surprise the lengths party leaders are currently going to show they are just simple family types.

¹ Inspired by an article by Elizabeth Payne, "Identity politics can get complicated", *Ottawa Citizen*, 14 April 2011

There are two problems with this approach to democracy: the first is, as Ms. Payne pointed out, that every Canadian wears many hats and that they are part of many different groups at the same time. The second is that any semblance of solidarity by candidates with any particular group evaporates as soon as the election is over. The election pretence of multiple personalities just can't be maintained. Subsequently, elected politicians feel free to simply go their own way (since they can't be everything to everybody in reality) focusing on selling down to the citizenry rather than representing citizens upwards to government.

This is unfortunate because our collective capacity is hobbled and our sense of belonging is greatly diminished. A generation ago, Joe Clark pitched Canada as a "community of communities". For a while this notion seemed like it might actually represent where Canada was going. Today, however, we are becoming a collection of competing communities with apparently with fewer and fewer links between us – our differences being reinforced with every election. We are strangers today when we used to be neighbours. We behave as if we have nothing to gain or nothing to learn from anyone else. We behave as if we didn't depend on anyone else. We have no shared purpose. Our national culture is increasingly self-serving -- to gain as much as we can from everyone else with minimum cost to ourselves.

On the other hand, a community is by definition a group of different people, with different knowledge, different skills and different perspectives. We are in fact "complex and Canadian", says Ms. Payne. These differences are our nation's strength. The recognition of our diversity and our inter-dependence is the basis of our security, our innovativeness and our resilience. But the success of any community requires the pooling of resources and knowledge, together with the learning made possible by the 'mashup' of all those differing views. The bedrock foundation of any community is, however, the ability to listen to one another honestly in an environment of mutual respect and trust.

Sadly as we have seen in the House of Commons and on the campaign trail, this is not the trend. It is identity politics or, to spin it another way, it is the politics of limiting Canadians that is being reinforced. The emphasis on differences leads to increased competition, and eventually fewer and fewer winners and more and more losers. It leads socially to the same inevitable outcome as a lack of diversity does in any ecological system – extinction! For example, the simplest explanation for the public's growing disengagement with politics, is because they can no longer see themselves reflected in the few narrow, superficial and often irrelevant (to them) perspectives being offered. And so the impact of identity politics leads to a fundamental question of legitimacy when the public can no longer identify with their leaders.

Parliament is supposed to be the place where our most important conversations take place. It is supposed to be where all Canadian communities can be represented as a single community to hammer out their shared purpose and common agenda. Traditionally, the House was Canada's premier forum for Canadians to listen to each other's stories and to allow them to have a conversation together. It was in fact Canada's foremost social learning vehicle. Although the potential for this type of learning remains with Parliament – fewer and fewer politicians bother to make use of it because no one cares to listen any more. Why listen when you can automatically tune out those who are not like you.

This week's debate between tweedledee and tweddledum offered little hope that any of the candidates have the capacity to do what really needs doing – harnessing the power of all Canadians to collectively deal with the urgent issues that we all face. Where's the real leadership to bring us together?