



Response to “Federal Liberals looking for sacrificial lamb”

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Chantal Hébert’s piece “Federal Liberals looking for sacrificial lamb” (*Hill Times*, 5 November 2012) makes it clear that the Liberal leadership race is not about ideas but about fame and celebrity. What the federal Liberals are apparently doing is abdicating their legitimate policy space for a popularity contest or a political version of reality TV. No one seems to be articulating any rationale for nominating Trudeau other than the assumptions that the son will somehow restore the glory of the father; or that a leader that’s good looking is better than one that’s not. The first assumption smacks of age-old traditions of aristocracy and the second is pure narcissism. One has come to expect such superficialities from an over-hyped media, but the absence of substance from the Liberal party itself reflects a degree of intellectual and moral bankruptcy that must delight both Conservative and NDP strategists?

In contrast to our forefathers, we have embraced the notion of romantic style leadership, the ‘white knight’, that swoops in to relieve us of the inconvenient burden of all our problems. Our forefathers didn’t trust leaders which is why they empowered MPs with the power to control them. Today our white knights allow us to fantasize that these are not our problems but someone else’s. We no longer have to worry whether change is actually accomplished or whether our chosen leaders have the capacity bring the huge diversity of Canadians together to achieve some great shared goal or even whether they have an ounce of sense. In fact, we don’t have to think about issues at all. Sadly this is what Canadian politics has become. We can just vote for someone famous.

Maybe Liberals should ask Paul Gross (he’s already nailed the role of a conniving PM in H_2O) or Keanu Reeves (he’s been successful against a stultifying, Matrix bureaucracy that was almost as bad as Canada’s) or maybe they should nominate Justin Bieber (he would definitely win any contest for cuteness -- and he’d certainly get the young vote out to boot.). So why do Liberal party officials seem so intent on limiting their pool of leadership candidates to a small group of boring, largely old, unattractive Liberal party members when there’s a world of famous people out there who could be candidates? No wonder Trudeau’s chances seem like a sure thing.

More seriously, why aren't Liberals talking about our eroding system of democracy, one in which Parliament itself is fast becoming a ceremonial relic. We effectively have a one-tier executive government now with only a weak judiciary and hobbled Parliamentary officers to keep it in check – MPs from every party having long ago abdicated their role. As Jeffrey Simpson has observed we have a largely benign and friendly dictatorship. But what happens if we get someone not so friendly? Liberals are partially responsible for this democratic decline. Do the Liberals have the courage to enunciate what real democracy might look like in this day and age of Internet enabled connectivity and mass collaboration?

There are great many collective challenges for which *absolutely no one* has all the answers, all the resources or even all the power to fix. Yet instead of helping to marshal our collective will, knowledge and resources, we have been saddled with leaders who seem to relish opportunities to distract collective attention from any serious dialogue by pitting one group against another for partisan gain. Who will shepherd the needed partnerships, Liberals?

Former PM Joe Clark had it right in describing Canada as a community of communities - - one that thrives on diversity as the engine of its creativity and welfare. However, various Governments for several decades now, seem to have relinquished any thought that they represent all Canadians in favour of monochromatic views that pander to a few small groups (that 20% of the overall population that actually voted for them) while discouraging broad citizen engagement in the belief that conflict and criticism are undesirable and should be suppressed. Are the Liberals willing to be the government of all Canadians and to facilitate our shared creativity and collaboration together?

And everywhere there is a partisan eagerness to emphasize what isn't working and not what is. Feel isolated, feel afraid, feel entitled to something for nothing, let the experts handle it, feel righteous anger to punish those who try but fail to fully succeed, and feel so impotent, confused and incapable that the need of a firm hand is self evident. Such are the arguments of con men who first steal a person's sense of ownership before freely walking away with what they actually own.

It's pretty obvious that the Conservatives and NDP are laying out positions that will demonstrate their mutually incompatible world views of what Canada and Canadians should be. Why would Liberals choose to be followers of these narratives? Why can't Liberals be the party of a wholly different dialogue, one that focuses on restoring citizen ownership, on refurbishing our Parliamentary democracy, on marshalling our collective assets to seek innovative solutions to difficult problems and on creating a shared future that we can all contribute to living into? As it stands, the Liberal party seems bereft of leading ideas. So why would anyone serious be inspired to lead it?