



Being likeable is nasty business

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This just in: Canadians are disgusted with political parties. We think politicians don't care what voters think.

If you're wondering what fools spent time and money unearthing that mouldy old chestnut, wonder no more.

It's a charity called Samara and they're not fools. They do creative studies of the Canadian political system.

And if they dig up something nasty, don't blame them. They didn't bury it there in the first place.

In fact, this study did dig up something nasty.

Specifically, the finding that 69% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that "Candidates and political parties are interested only in people's votes, not their opinions."

If only it were so.

If only the parties were interested in winning your vote by, say, putting forward a platform that was clearly affordable, remedied abuses in the exercise of power by the executive, or was logically and consistently derived from a set of clearly articulated principles.

Or, dare I suggest, hearing your views and arguing with them.

Instead, sadly, parties are obsessively interested in your opinions.

But only to study you like rats in a maze.

They slice the electorate into scientifically precise segments, which they peer at through the powerful lens of modern social science to learn all about your hopes, fears and aspirations, and tailor their communications not to what they think but to what they think you think.

The whole goal is that the appalling sludge that blasts forth from their publicity machines should strike you as resembling with uncanny precision exactly what you already believed.



The effort is in one sense prodigiously impressive. Political parties, and pollsters, now divide voters not merely into provinces, genders, ages or ethnic groups, but into literally dozens of precise voter profiles (Enviro-nics, for instance, apparently had 66 such by 2011).

And they figure out exactly what message will appeal to an archetypal voter with some cutesy-poo name like "Henry" or "Zoe" and aim that message at them relentlessly.

Barack Obama was an especially successful pioneer of this modern "microtargeting," by the way, just as another Democrat, George McGovern, blazed a trail in manipulative direct-mail fundraising two generations earlier. But Canadians are now eagerly copying his techniques.

"Big Data" is the "in" thing for today's "with-it" political operators.

And spreadsheets and focus groups tell them which words to say or avoid, which attacks work, what style of shirt reassures people over 40 from the Punjab, what magic phrase will lead Abdul or Henri to turn out on voting day.

And that's what they say, wear and claim to think.

In their tireless efforts to lure you through the maze to the right voting outcome, they avoid words that light up bits of your brain associated with negative emotions, like "no" or "can't" or "demographic decline." If they discover you want something you cannot have, like efficient socialized medicine, they don't argue with you.

They pander to you.

Now you might still object that politicians aren't interested in your opinion in any wholesome way.

They don't want to hear what you think because it might be true, they care about you as a human being, or any of that weak-kneed stuff. Quite true.

These guys and gals are pros, hard-driven, ambitious, do-what-it-takes winners unconstrained by petty scruples.

They are also, ironically, rendered repulsive by their obsessive efforts to seem likeable.

As the Samara study shows, this odiously cynical and manipulative effort increasingly disgusts its targets, who are not, in fact, rats in a lab but human beings.

But to fight back we must study them with the same cold detachment they use on us.

<http://www.sunnewsnetwork.ca/sunnews/straighttalk/archives/2014/02/20140220-072837.html>



If we do, we'll realize the problem isn't that they're not interested in our opinions.

It's that they are, in a very wrong way.