

Must Politicians Be Phonies?

Advice to aspiring politicians: Don't check your conscience at the door.

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The [Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions](#) at the University of British Columbia recently organized a [conference](#) that pondered: “Why Don't (More) Good People Enter Politics?” One of the main conclusions reached at the conference was that we need to empower ordinary parliamentarians. There is a pretty powerful logic behind this idea.

Let's start with the basics. What do we want from a leader? I think it is fair to say that nobody likes a phony. We don't want people in politics who we don't believe and can't trust. But politics seems to attract just that kind of person. Why?

One of the reasons “good” people (for the sake of argument, let's say we mean by this people who try to be truthful and treat others with respect) don't want to go into politics is that they have to pretend to be something that they are not. As former B.C. finance minister [Carole Taylor](#) put it, “We expect politicians to be perfect, and if you're not perfect then you better pretend you're perfect.”

Nobody, she said, wants “the kind of media scrutiny that looks at everybody I've ever dated, every business I've ever been in, every person I've ever had coffee with,” because nobody can say they've “led an error-free existence.”

This is a particularly powerful inhibitor for women who don't want their family – and, often, especially their children – to see them dragged through the mud of slander.

Another way politics selects (or turns otherwise good people into) phonies is by creating disincentives to admit mistakes or to change one's views. In an adversarial game, there is no incentive to admit your opponent may be right. “I've never belonged to a political party with which I agreed 100 per cent of the time,” said [Rick Anderson](#), a leading political strategist and consultant. “There is no such beast. But day after day after day partisans are expected to go out and pretend otherwise. The other folks are always wrong, we're

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always right. ... These things are not true, and the beginning of a deceptive approach to politics starts in that partisan caucus mentality.”

Partisanship

As a political scientist, I know political parties are an essential part of democracy. And yet, citing a recent report by [Samara Canada](#), former deputy prime minister [Anne McLellan](#) noted that, for many parliamentarians, “their own party was identified as the reason they could not do the job they believed they were [sent] to Ottawa to do on behalf of their constituents.” Parties have become, as Anderson puts it, “vehicles for obstructing critical thinking.”

The problem is not parties per se, but the fact that partisanship has reached such toxic levels that it has limited the scope for meaningful debate and deliberation. Parties implicitly tell candidates: “Come to me with your good ideas.” But, says Carole Taylor, there is a hidden trap: “Walk through the door and I’ll never hear your ideas again.”

Taylor is not saying there should be no party discipline, but rather that if there is some issue that’s really important to you, you ought to be able to speak up and express it. Otherwise, she says, “What is the point?” If we make politicians pretend that they always disagree with the other side, and that their side is always right, then the political process manufactures phonies. Critical functions like Question Period become meaningless when everyone toes the party line and, as Taylor puts it, “there is no chance to say ‘I want you guys to think about this from this point of view – you might change your mind.’”

Of course, not all partisanship is a bad thing. Former B.C. premier [Mike Harcourt](#) argues that “there is nothing wrong with partisanship about ideas and values.” But when does it go too far? As a former criminal-defence lawyer, Harcourt appreciates the value of an adversarial system, “allowing different values and different ideas to clash.” The problem, he says, is when partisanship “becomes a grotesque sideshow, as Question Period has become. It’s when you get into really vicious negative advertising that is just there to pummel somebody – and it works.”

What are the limits of partisanship?

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Can we be ethical partisans? When does partisanship serve the public good, and when does it hurt it? The answers to these questions are rooted in the very principles that underpin our democratic institutions. And these principles need to be better understood and articulated.

Perhaps the underlying problem is that we have lost the ability to articulate visions of the public good, and are losing confidence in our political process's ability to generate them. But our institutions cannot work unless their incumbents are committed to the idea that democracy is about more than voting for elective dictatorships.

The purpose of Parliament, says Rick Anderson, is not to pass the government's budget or legislation, but to decide what they should be. In other words, Parliament is not supposed to simply do the government's bidding – it is supposed to be a check on the government's power to raise taxes and spend public money, and is supposed to legislate on matters of public interest. But these powers are gutted to the extent that party leaders and their whips control access to cabinet positions, committee assignments, and other resources that are absolutely necessary for parliamentarians to do their jobs.

This is compounded when members of Parliament enter office with only the foggiest sense of the job description. And they make it worse when they passively accept the idea that there is no place for free votes and meaningful deliberation in the House.

So how can we make our democracy better?

In the spirit of generating an ongoing conversation about these matters, here are some initial thoughts on an agenda for democratic reform that came out of the conference at UBC:

First, the purpose and role of Parliament and parliamentarians in our constitutional system needs to be re-examined, with an eye to strengthening our understanding of their essential function in the separation of powers as a check on the executive.

Second, the culture of politics needs to be cleaned up. Independence should be rewarded and celebrated, not punished; leaders should expect less deference from their caucus members.

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Third, with the caveat that disciplined parties are essential in a parliamentary democracy, there is scope within the political process for more free votes, stronger committees, and less-centralized decision-making.

Fourth, votes of confidence should be used to reinforce parliamentary power over the executive, rather than the other way around.

Fifth, the nomination process needs to be better-regulated, and less controlled by the party leadership, so that individual MPs may be freer to act as powerful and responsive representatives of their constituencies.

And finally, for all those would-be candidates out there, here is a further thought: If you're asked to run, don't check your conscience, free will, and ethical principles at the door.