

The real reason political parties are failing: Delacourt

By dividing Canadians into friends and enemies, parties have strayed away from what citizens want

SUSAN DELACOURT, THE TORONTO STAR

Published on: February 21, 2014

Let me tell you about political people. They are different from you and me.

If F. Scott Fitzgerald were alive and writing today, that might have been his introduction to the latest poll results about the gulf between the political class in Canada and the rest of the population.

[The poll, by the Samara organization](#), showed that political parties are falling down on the main job that Canadians expect them to do — specifically, in “reaching out to Canadians.”

The 1,800 poll respondents also gave failing grades to the parties in the tasks of hearing or coming up with new ideas. So there’s an immediate challenge to the 3,000 or so people gathering in Montreal this weekend for the big Liberal convention: stop talking amongst yourselves and start talking to the larger mass of Canadians who have checked out of politics.

Samara is a non-partisan, non-profit organization. Devoted to democratic improvement in Canada, it didn’t dwell too much [in its poll analysis](#) on why political parties have strayed so far away from what the public expects of them.

But the answer may lie in the extreme polarization of the political realm in the past decade or so.

Rather than “reaching out” to Canadians, political parties have been busy dividing the population into likely and unlikely voters; lists of friends and enemies. They now have the technology and the databases to do that sorting in an extremely sophisticated way.

It’s resulted in a world of absolutes, where you’re either 100 per cent right or 100 per cent wrong. The conversation, if it can be called that, consists of people yelling past each other and drive-by insults to the intelligence of anyone who doesn’t agree entirely with the team.

Who wants to live that way? Are we surprised that so few Canadians want to join political parties — or even listen to them?

The irony is that Canadians in general have become far less tribal about politics over the past few decades. Where people used to cast their ballots based on loyalty to family voting traditions or geography, they now shop their votes around, often changing their minds several times throughout an electoral campaign.

http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2014/02/21/the_real_reason_political_parties_are_failing_delacourt.html

Political parties, on the other hand, have adjusted to this “flexible” electorate by hardening the choices — you’re either with us or against us.

This week, as part of [an online Washington Post series](#), Canadian political scientist Richard Johnston wrote about the increasing polarization in this country. He points out that it’s not necessarily you or me making sharper distinctions in our political views — it’s what’s on offer from the political parties.

“The big battalions now are on the flanks, rather than in the middle,” Johnston writes.

Years ago, I thought that the difference between political people and the rest of us could be distilled down into something about a fondness for group activities and public speaking. Some people are into those things, some people aren’t.

It hit me as I was standing in the middle of a [1993 leadership convention for the Progressive Conservative party](#), and anthropologically observing delegates for candidate Jean Charest, wearing stuffed-toy turtles on their heads.

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn’t imagine any scenario, for work or fun, that would make me put a plush toy on my head and chant aloud in a crowded arena. Those people; they were different from you and me.

Talking this over with Charest much later, he gave me a spirited answer on the crucial need in a democracy for people who would wear turtles on their heads. For him, it was a measure of civic-mindedness; a willingness to plunge into the chaos of the public space.

Now, though, it seems there are other, more serious things that divide the political class from the rest of us. While most of us are living our lives in the interesting middle, where people are sometimes right, sometimes wrong, the political folks are playing at the “flanks.”

Nearly a century ago, when F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote his short story *The Rich Boy*, he warned that wealth — or the lack of it — created divisions we could never really bridge. Rich people, he wrote, are “soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful.”

Now that same kind of cultural gulf exists between the political class and the rest of us, though it’s an open question on who’s harder or more cynical.

Samara titled its poll findings: “By Invitation Only” — suggesting that Canadian political parties have become exclusive, members-only private clubs.

It might be even worse than that, though. With their fierce, black-and-white classifications of the world into friends and enemies, right and wrong, the parties seem more like tribes than clubs.

And people who live that way are different from you and me.