

Moral Chameleons

Partisanship in politics.



If political partisanship bothers you, it probably means your political tribe is in power. You're satisfied with what they're doing, but the opposing side is making headway in the polls with outrageous and brazen partisan attacks.

If I were asked, however, "Were you any different with your all-in assaults on character, honesty, charity and even clothing choices when Canada's leader was Stephen Harper?" I'd have to admit I was not. His choice of cowboy shirts and hats at the Calgary Stampede, year after year—even his way of walking in cowboy boots—sandpapered me, and I'm talking roughest grade. It seemed to say so much about the man.

From my current perspective (i.e., with my choice of leader in power) it seems obvious that political partisanship should not equal in vehemence sports fanaticism; should not verge on the hatred of warring criminal gangs. It should be more dignified, like an Oxford debate. How Oxonian was I in the Harper era? Um, not very. How likely was I to see merit in anything the Conservatives legislated between 2006 and 2015? Not at all.

Someone who sees value in partisan competition would likely tell me I was simply responding from my value system in an honest way and that I'm likewise functioning out of that value set now. That's a nice out, but I don't think it's true. In fact, my value system probably adjusts itself so that I can approve my political team and damn the other side as needed.

I wouldn't be the only one. If, say, the current Liberal government were to come up with a bill that the Conservatives would love if only they'd proposed it, the opposition would certainly speak against it, denigrate it to the press and vote against it (all hands on deck!). Otherwise, they'd be breathing life into their enemy, admitting that once in a blue moon Justin gets it right.

In this scenario, there's nothing for the government to gain by trying to strike a balance. In fact, if they did propose things philosophically acceptable to both sides, their supporters would feel the party had both wandered from its principles and contradicted its contention that the opposition are fools. The idea of both sides sitting down and working out a compromise, with the public watching, is laughable—like expecting the Montagues and Capulets to negotiate how best to assist their lovebirds, Romeo and Juliet.

This strikes me as a big problem for democracy. As for those who have strived for mutual respect in question period, give up now. Put your efforts into something more possible, like global nuclear disarmament.

But before giving up on this, I should see if there are any basic rules both sides uphold. For this I'm going to employ the

Ten Commandments, with apologies to anyone who follows a different rulebook. I'll restrict myself to commandments 5 through 10: the ones relating to social conduct.

Number 5: Honour Thy Father and Mother. At least in terms of parliamentary conduct, this may be a commandment upheld by all. That is, jumping up and yelling "Your father is flatulent!" is not done.

Number 6: Murder. Killing opposing parliamentarians is also not done—though there is sometimes hopeless disagreement on what constitutes "murder."

Number 7: Adultery. This might seem an area of agreement, but I'm not so sure. While many Americans say they're not offended by their president's having had an affair with a porn star, the same set of facts would overturn a Canadian parliamentarian's canoe. But I'm not sure our MPs and MLAs are above tossing a juicy adultery rumour onto social media—or, rather, letting a minion do so, someone who could be tossed under the bus later if need be.

Number 8: Theft. Here we have a value that's supposedly agreed upon but which certain candidates and parties have broken rather publicly. For example: willingness to use information obtained by hacking or robocalling the other side's voting list (obtained by theft)

and giving out wrong polling addresses for election day.

Number 9: No False Testimony Against Thy Neighbour. Let's face it: In politics, this one was turfed long ago. The fellow running the opposition in Alberta has been singled out by reporters for flunking fact checks daily. I don't think his problem is poor internet research skills. The fake news phenomenon drifting north has turned truth into fairytale. "Surely to goodness an adult person like you doesn't believe in unassailable truth...!"

Number 10: No Coveting Thy Neighbour's Wife or Property. I'm fairly sure all Canadian politicians, if asked publicly if they live by this moral sanction, would shout "Yes! And how dare you even ask?" I'm also surprised this is still one of the 10 commandments. After all, coveting, defined as yearning for, is sort of what capitalism runs on. ■

Fred Stenson's most recent novel is Who By Fire (Doubleday). Other books include The Trade, Lightning and The Great Karoo.

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