



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The University of British Columbia

**“WHY DON’T MORE GOOD PEOPLE ENTER POLITICS?
(AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT...)”**

CONCEPT NOTE FOR A CONFERENCE AT UBC

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The following concept note is not for circulation. It was prepared for distribution to potential invitees and sponsors of the conference to provide a sense of the issues we may wish to address.

THE QUESTION TO ASK

“Why don’t more good people want to go into politics?”

I put this question to Mike Harcourt, former Premier of BC, over lunch. I want to know whether he thinks this would be a good place to begin a public conversation about Canadian democracy. He smiles wryly and tells a story about a talk he gave at UBC’s Vancouver Institute after he left the premier’s office. He asked his audience to think of words that came to mind when he said “politician.” Most of the audience came up with expletives like “scum bag” and “crook.”

And yet Harcourt, who calls himself a “recovering politician,” continues to be astonished by the quality of people in politics today. He recommends I read a couple of books written by Steve Paikin on the extraordinary qualities of many elected leaders—as well as the heavy personal price they often pay. Like Harcourt, Paikin is concerned about the diminishing prestige of Canadian politicians.

In one notable passage in *The Life*, Paikin says: “Unless the memories of my blessedly normal childhood in Hamilton, Ontario, are completely indicative of nothing—and I don’t think they are—there was a time when young people in this country grew up thinking politicians were regular, decent folk.” Politicians “weren’t

up there with hockey players, but they weren't disreputable bums either" (2001: 39).

So why is it that politics has come to be, as one political scientist calls it, "the despised profession" (May 2001)?

Pamela Goldsmith-Jones has part of the answer. The energetic mayor of West Vancouver points to excessive bickering. "If I got up in the morning and decided to spend the entire day arguing with my husband, where would that get us?" Many Canadians, she suggests, see their politicians as doing little more.

"My style is definitely consensual," she told *Vancouver Magazine* (June 2011, p. 56) "An adversarial system presumes that people want to see a fight—a winner and a loser." But that is not right for local politics.

"Being mayor is the best job in the world," she continues, because it involves working with people to get things done without the constant partisanship that bogs down other levels of government—and some other municipalities. Goldsmith-Jones is evidently much sought to run provincially, but (so far, at least) she is having none of it.

The theme of partisanship comes up in a different way in the political career of David Emerson. Emerson's decision to enter politics after a successful career in business is not unusual. A recent study of former parliamentarians found that few were what one might think of as "consummate insiders" (Loat and MacMillan 2010: 13). Many entered politics relatively late in life, often unexpectedly, and they did so because they were approached by a friend or acquaintance and asked to run. These parliamentarians tended to think of themselves as "outsiders."

After crossing the floor to become a government cabinet minister in the Tory government, however, David Emerson was startled by the visceral hatred toward the Liberal Party in the Tory caucus (Martin 2010, p. 3); he was also surprised by the intensely negative reaction to his decision to cross the floor by his former Liberal colleagues.

Politicians like Emerson are different from what Jeffrey Simpson calls "political lifers" – people who spend their entire lives in politics (*Globe and Mail*, August 28, 2010). For David Duncan Chesman, Q.C., a partner in Gowlings in Vancouver and the former elected Chair of Vancouver's Board of Parks and Recreation, the largely self-appointed career politicians who occupy and surround elected offices are a disincentive to talented citizens circulating through the political system, renewing leadership.

Perhaps the skepticism about politicians derives from the very nature of political life itself. To be a good politician you need what Max Weber called an "instinct for power," but you also have to persuade people that wish to serve the public. It's a

difficult balancing act. The problem, in other words, is not just the kind of people who enter politics, but also the activity into which they enter.

Sam Sullivan, the former mayor of Vancouver, and soon to be appointed community professor at Green College in UBC, distinguishes government from politics: “They require different values. In politics, you have to rigorously favour your friends and oppose your enemies, but in good government you have to be impartial, and try to rule for all society. Once you’re in government, you should pursue government. I have a disdain for those who see government as merely an extension of politics – it’s harmful to the public good” (Evans 2009, p. 5).

The Best Laid Plans, an engaging novel by Terry Fallis, winner of the Stephen Leacock Award for Humour, tells the story of a crusty but decent citizen, aptly named Angus (Celtic god of wisdom), who agrees to be nominated for election after being given assurances that there was no possible way he could win. When the wildly popular incumbent is caught in a lurid sex scandal, cantankerous Angus is elected. In a gratifyingly populist—if not altogether unexpected—twist of the plot, Angus turns out to be an exemplary member of parliament precisely because he is indifferent to power or partisan politics and does exactly what he thinks is right.

It would be naïve to think ordinary Canadians, untainted by power, are more virtuous than the elected officials who lead us. As an exasperated colleague of mine put it, “do we really believe we are morally superior to every last one of the 308 member of the House of Commons?” Maybe not. But we do want politicians to serve something larger than their own egos. Nothing spells political disaster like the perception that a politician is in it for himself.

One of the most effective Tory attack ads in the last election said of Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff “he didn’t come back for you.” Perhaps it was the way he was recruited, and the fact that he was never elected in a convention, or perhaps it was personal qualities of the candidate, but somehow, Ignatieff never managed to come up with a credible story about why he returned to Canada, other than to be Prime Minister. That wasn’t good enough.

Whatever the personal motivations of the elected official, the reality is that a political career demands deep sacrifices. In the last few months I have made a point of buttonholing everyone I know who has chosen *not* to run for office. Most point to the personal cost. A successful lobbyist said he would have made a lot less money in his career had he been elected to office. A medical researcher did not want to live in a fish bowl. A family therapist pointed to the grueling travel between Vancouver and Ottawa.

“The harsh truth,” according to former Prime Minister Paul Martin, is that “many people who have been successful in their lives – whether it is in business, public service, sport, or in the community – are reluctant to sacrifice the reputations they have succeeded in building up over decades to the bitter attacks that characterize so

much of our public life. The challenges facing women are particularly tough since they are often expected to balance family and career in a way that many men are insulated from” (Martin 2008: 264). Anne McLellan served as Martin’s Deputy MP, and she concurs. She cites three reasons women don’t want to run for office: personal costs, not wanting families to be dragged into the spotlight, and partisan conflict.

We might better ask why anyone runs for office at all. And yet there seems to be no shortage of volunteers.

THE CONVERSATION TO HOLD

UBC’s Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions seeks to stimulate publicly engaged research and teaching on innovations in democratic governance and the performance of democratic institutions. Attracting good people into politics is among the central problems of contemporary democracy, but it is only the point of departure for an ongoing conversation that will begin with a conference to be held in the fall of 2011.

For the conversation to be meaningful, we have to be sure we’re asking good questions. The best thing about the question “Why don’t more good people want to go into politics?” is that it is provocative and touches a nerve. Yet the answers go in different directions.

For Jack Austin, the question is elitist. “The real question,” he says, is “what discourages community leaders from entering federal politics?”

For Gerald Kristianson, who founded BC’s leading government relations consulting firm, “the question is almost insulting.” He makes a great point. When I say someone is a good person, do I mean anything more than that I like that person? One’s idea of a good politician, it would seem, cannot be separated from one’s partisan politics. Or can it?

Are there positive qualities in a politician that transcend partisanship?

We can begin by thinking about key activities that form part of political life. We know that partisanship is an inevitable part of politics, but also that all politicians purport to act in the interest of something bigger than their own careers. We may doubt there are universally held “goods” in politics, and yet democratic politics seems to demand some notion of the common good.

In *Thinking about Leadership*, political theorist Nannerl O. Keohane (2010: 19) argues that leadership is about “providing solutions to common problems or offering ideas about how to accomplish collective purposes, and mobilizing the energies of others to follow these course of action.”

This is an impressive vision; as such it finds politics today sadly deficient. Instead of focusing on common problems, politicians too often look for wedge issues to divide us. Instead of mobilizing people for collective purposes, we see voter suppression strategies and negative campaigning.

McGill University political scientist professor (and UBC graduate) Stuart Soroka argues that negative advertising works because humans are genetically programmed to “monitor error.” For evolutionary reasons, we monitor negative forces more closely than positive ones (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 2 February 2011).

No law says you cannot ridicule an opponent, questioning his or her personal motivations, or suppress the vote for an adversary by making false or misleading statements. Political scientist Tom Flanagan argues that elections are merely “war by other means” (*Globe and Mail*, April 4, 2011).

But there is another view. Politics requires what Aristotle called “practical wisdom.” Practical wisdom is the prudence or good judgment to know how to do what is right for oneself and others. This is similar to what Keohane means when she talks about our common problems and collective purposes.

Ken Sharpe, a political scientist who will be a visiting professor at UBC in the spring of 2012, draws on Aristotle to make the case that good judgment comes from practice and experience, not learning or textbooks. There is no school where one can learn to be a good politician. Just as one could only become brave, as Aristotle argued, by exposing oneself to danger and learning to make light of it, political judgment—and virtue—is learned through practice.

Successful politicians recognize the importance of good judgment. “They are always balancing what they think best with what is possible,” says Sharpe. “They are always balancing the core principles that are inevitably in tension in a liberal democracy—like freedom versus equality, civil liberties versus national security, property rights of the haves versus the welfare of the have-nots.”

Such balancing demands practical wisdom. So does managing an NDP caucus, which a bemused Harcourt says can often be like teaching a kindergarten class. Leaders need to figure out who is going to take problematic files off his or her desk, and who is going to bring new ones.

Sam Sullivan makes a similar observation: “many of us in politics have concluded that you can't teach good judgment, which I think is practical wisdom. Just like you can't teach a person to think strategically. Being on a team, or in a political caucus, with someone who lacks judgment is like sitting with a ticking time bomb. Occasionally, people who have varying degrees of lack of judgment get elected on each team and they necessitate enormous amounts of energy that go into damage control and constant supervision.”

If such practical wisdom is essential to be a “good” politician of any party, how are wise politicians recruited? How do our electoral, party, and government institutions encourage or corrode the learning of such good political judgment? Are we draining the wisdom out of politicians, and the wise politicians out of politics?

The same kind of practical wisdom that is demanded of politicians as they balance the pursuit of their own power and interests with the public good is demanded of another profession that is deeply intertwined with modern political life: journalism.

Former UBC journalism professor Stephen Ward argues that journalistic activity involves a kind of applied ethics. Journalists can destroy reputations and intrude in private lives in ways that inhibit political life. The phone hacking scandal that has engulfed the Murdoch media empire in the United Kingdom is an extreme example.

The media can also contribute to the public good by acting independently in pursuit of the truth—“without fear or favor” (Ward 2010 p. 44). And the spread of new social media make it easier to get past the traditional media gatekeepers. And, as Sharpe puts it, “good journalists—in the new or traditional media—need practical wisdom in the most ordinary of their everyday decisions: how is the story to be framed, what level of fact-checking is enough, how to balance the ‘being first’ that markets seem to demand with the ‘being right’ that professional journalism demands.”

Part of the conference at UBC will address the role of the media, both as a potential inhibitor of political recruitment but also as the new agora in which political life is played out.

SOLUTIONS TO FIND

UBC’s Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions played a major role in the Citizens’ Assembly process in BC. It has created a wiki-type platform to build an encyclopedia of participatory innovations around the world. And it has developed a mechanism for monitoring democratic progress and backsliding in Latin America. Can it contribute ideas for the renewal of democratic life in Canada?

Ideas are not in short supply.

Jeffrey Simpson of the *Globe and Mail* (May 13, 2011) argues for a council of candidates between elections. “Parties should value their losers, instead of forgetting about them the day after the election,” he argues. “Why not keep them interested in the party, validate their contribution, and summon their commitment between elections by creating something we might call the Council of the Candidates for each party.”

David Chesman suggests periodic summits of political, community, business, and academic leaders.

Sam Sullivan proposes an institute to help prepare candidates for holding elective office. The idea is not without precedent. To improve the gender balance in local politics, the Canadian Federation of Municipalities runs a campaign school for women. The decision to run, financing campaigns, campaign ethics, public speaking, and media training are among the issues addressed.

These are just some of the creative ideas that are worth exploring to see if a new generation of political leaders can be cultivated.

If we fail to cultivate, recruit, and retain leaders with a vocation for politics, we risk seeing more of the same in Canadian politics. We may continue to see the kind of partisanship that inhibits good people from entering politics, perhaps especially women, and encourages instead those with the requisite ruthlessness rather than substantive qualifications. We will see public trust and confidence in institutions decline, and continuing cynicism and contempt for politicians. We will continue to see science and evidence-based policy squeezed out by a poisonous partisan point-scoring mentality.

By convening a conference at UBC in the fall of 2011, the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions hopes to start a public conversation about politics and democracy in Canada. What is wrong with it, and what can be done better? Everyone is welcome. Come and join the conversation.

WANT TO READ MORE?

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