

A Call for Well-Intentioned People to Risk Political Engagement

by Ralph C. Martin

It's not unusual to indulge in sarcasm about politicians. However, we might pause and ask, "what if well intentioned people do not risk political engagement?" It's understandable that an aspiring politician could assume that the risk to reputation, family life and privacy is too high.

In March this year, my former history teacher, Bob Huschka, died. He had fascinated us with political tales, at Elmira District Secondary School. Part of his legacy is that he consistently admonished us to be politically engaged. It wasn't that he was starry eyed, since he could also tell startling stories, about the nasty side of politics.

It's tempting to be cynical about the efforts of political aspirants and political lifers. Chances are their human frailties will somewhat disrupt their original higher calling. It is true that some politicians, enamoured with power, will become corrupt. In the novel, The Cellist of Sarajevo by Steven Galloway, in the depth of the siege with violence and ubiquitous water and food shortages, the city is described as "a place where neither gangster nor politician, go hungry."

It is also true that some politicians rise to challenges and inspire citizens and other lawmakers to do the right thing. We need authentic political contributions, at every level, with intellectual rigour, stamina, humour, forgiveness and humility.

With one piece of cloth, sandals and a walking stick, Ghandi walked through India and inspired his fellow citizens to assume their political destiny, even though he himself never held political office. In 2004, Tommy Douglas was named "The Greatest Canadian." He had emerged as the Premier, from a political maelstrom in Saskatchewan, to introduce universal health care, for the first time in North America.

'At least be well informed and vote,' Mr. Huschka told us. Then he showed a list of many key democratic stand-offs that had been decided by one vote. And he asked "What if one or two had not bothered to vote?"

Today's cohort of 18 to 30 year olds tends to avoid voting and some tell me they assume that regardless of their vote, the political system will lumber on and not address their needs. Have they heard too many cynical comments about politics?

If more youth voted, it could have a huge impact on the next federal election. Such interacting issues as climate change and loss of environmental resilience, inequality, migration of refugees, soil degradation, excess waste and resource wars will have an increasingly deleterious impact on young citizens, if these issues are punted to the future, while fiddling politically with perceptions of past priorities.

There is pressure on politicians to develop policies for managing their jurisdictions, as an efficient business. With due recognition for the value of economic prudence, we are more than clients of our governments. We are citizens. As citizens, we collectively hold the legacy and potential of our country and provinces and municipalities.

We live on, and with, our corner of the biosphere at this time of Earth's expression of evolved elegance. As humans we now have agency in co-evolution. Regardless of our varying spiritual and philosophical orientations and financial, educational and cultural status, we come together politically, in communities, to meld our collective aspirations and intentions, to build together, with respect and justice. To sustain the complexity of modern societies, the task of co-evolution is to dodge irreversible destruction while designing new ways to live in balance with the ecosystems, we have inherited.

Political engagement, in democratic societies, is a privilege we would squander to our shame and possible demise. The stakes are too high to glibly give up because of indulging in cynicism, bewilderment, embarrassment or lack of vision. We are here, now. Our trajectory calls for political alacrity, collaboration and perseverance.

The last time I saw Bob Huschka, I shared that I had run for office at the provincial level, when I lived in Nova Scotia. With a deft question or two he ascertained that I had run for the wrong party. Nevertheless, in a few minutes I understood that he was fully supportive of me being politically involved, while he clearly articulated opposing ideas for me to consider.

I learned again, that by respectfully wrestling with varying opinions, we can spiral in a Hegelian dialectic of thesis vs antithesis to develop a modified thesis and do it again and again in an ongoing process, as our understanding and political actions broaden and deepen.

Authentic political discourse is hard work and yet, when well done, it is a fully human exercise and can even be fun. Of course political life is messy and may be embarrassing. I tip my hat to those who still dare to serve politically. What if more well-intentioned people followed Bob Huschka's advice to be more politically involved? What might be possible for Canada?

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