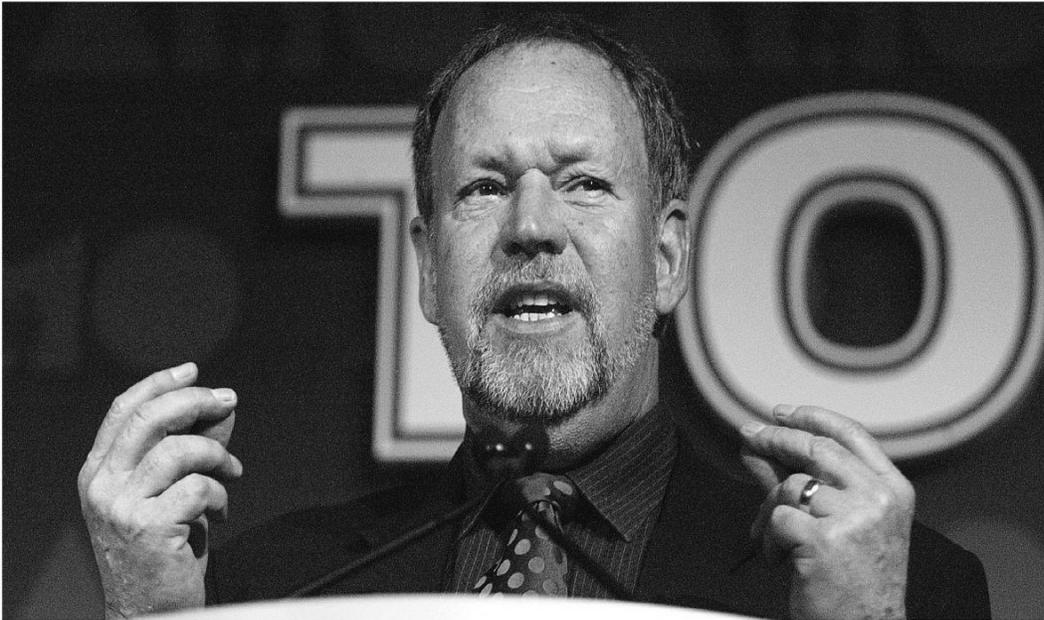


# Authenticity is in the eye of the beholder

**As appealing as the idea of a plain-talking politician might be, says Andrew Potter, there's a reason for talking points and image consultants**

By Andrew Potter, Citizen Special January 5, 2012



**Political commentator Allan Gregg, above, says politicians should get real. Andrew Potter warns that in public life, speaking your mind can be dangerous.**

**Photograph by: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen, Citizen Special**

Canada imports a lot of bad ideas from the United States - the Occupy movement, tough on crime legislation, all you can eat sushi - but the most aggressively misguided is the growing conviction that the solution to what ails the body politic is for our political leaders to be more authentic.

Arguing against authenticity is like arguing against the family farm, but when it comes to politics, the push for more authenticity fundamentally misunderstands the nature of mass politics, and contributes to the very problems it is supposed to solve.

The American writer Joe Klein signposted the trend in his 2006 book *Politics Lost*, an essay about the decline of authenticity in presidential politics. Klein took his inspiration from what he called Harry Truman's "Turnip Day" speech at the Democratic convention in 1948 that confirmed his nomination for president. Coming on stage after midnight, speaking plainly,

simply, and without notes, Truman challenged the "do-nothing Congress" to act upon those views they claim to endorse, and get back to work. Klein thinks we need more Turnip Day moments, more politicians like Truman. He argued politicians need to "figure out new ways to engage and inspire us - or maybe just some simple old ways, like saying what they think as plainly as possible."

In late November, Allan Gregg delivered a lecture to the Public Policy Forum called "On Authenticity: How the Truth can Restore Faith in Politics and Government." Gregg's claim is that there is a profound disconnect between what we want from our politicians, and what we are getting. Our leaders' most systematic failure, Gregg says, is that "they have not picked up on the electorate's craving for authenticity nor adjusted their behaviour to conform to this new reality."

Gregg has his own Turnip Day homily to explain just what he's getting at. He tells a story about the night he went to see a band in a club in Manhattan when the guitar player's electric pickup broke. Instead of stopping the show to fix the guitar, the band unplugged their instruments, moved closer to one another, and performed an intimate number. "As the last chord was struck, the room literally exploded with rapturous cheering, hooting."

Gregg thinks there's a lesson in this for our politicians. What they need to do, he suggests, is unplug from the way they've always done things and try to reconnect with the electorate. They must drop the prefab talking points designed to "conceal meaning." They need to stop claiming to be the only island of virtue in a sea of knaves. They should cancel all political advertising, and talk straight to the people, saying what they mean and meaning what they say.

How would the electorate respond to a politician who took this approach? Extremely well, Gregg believes. As evidence, he cites a poll showing that three quarters of Canadians would vote for a politician who promised to be truthful 100 per cent of the time, regardless of their party affiliation. "Speaking the truth," he concludes, "is not bad politics."

But as a public opinion researcher and former political strategist, Gregg surely knows two things to be true: First, that people lie to pollsters all the time. And second, that there is no fatter prey in the wild than a politician who speaks his mind. Sure, we say we desire more authenticity in our politics, but the reality is we want authenticity only when it mirrors our own narrow values and ideals. The reason why politicians hire image consultants and why they stick doggedly to their talking points is that spontaneity and frank talk are punished far more frequently than they are rewarded.

The bigger problem though is with the very concept of "politics unplugged." The metaphor of the political sphere as something like a small Manhattan club is exactly wrong. National politics is more like an outdoor rock festival with two or three stages, where radically different groups of fans are mixed together to see radically different bands. Pure volume is the only means of survival in such a scenario, and any group that tried to "connect" with the audience by going unplugged would get steamrolled.

No one goes into public life with the intention of speaking in sound bites, breaking their promises, and demonizing their opponents. But they are soon confronted with the challenge of

trying to communicate to millions of people under continuous and hostile gaze of a media that will rip them apart at the slightest misstep. Under the circumstances, the growing desire for our leaders to drop the all the pretence and "get real" reflects nothing more than our ongoing political immaturity.

Andrew Potter is the Citizen's managing editor.

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