

On Authenticity – How the Truth Can Restore Faith in Politics and Government

The Gordon Osbaldeston Lecture by Allan R. Gregg

“That above all – to thine own self be true; And it must follow as the night the day. Thou canst not then be false to any man”

Polonius’ advice to his son, Laertes in Hamlet

A Short History of the Erosion of Trust

Even someone with only a passing interest in current affairs would know our political leaders are in big trouble.

A few years ago, Seth Meyers of Weekend Update on Saturday Night Live developed a routine where he lampooned politicians by simply asking “Really!” no narrative; not even a snappy punch-line; simply a run a clip of a politician followed by an incredulous “Really!” Jon Stewart has taken this vein of comedy one step further where the joke doesn’t even require speech ... just show the politician speaking; pause for a moment; and arch an eye brow. Both routines are invariably followed by gales of laughter. Not only is the joke on our elected leaders, it seems they are the only ones left on the planet who don’t get it. And you also would not have to be a student of Canadian history to know that this condition is very different from the Canadian political culture of the past.

From William Kilgour’s description of Canada’s Peaceable Kingdom to John Porter’s Vertical Mosaic, we were taught that Canadians valued collective stability – peace, order and good government – over individual freedom – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – and that the nation was governed through elite accommodation where leaders benevolently led and citizens passively followed. And we looked to our leaders – and especially government – not simply to broker the public good, but if need be, to create and provide it. This Canada of the past was marked by deference to authority not belly laughs at their every utterance.

This orderly arrangement between leaders and followers was fueled by post War prosperity and a belief that progress was normal. The prevailing expectation in Canada throughout the 1950s, 1960s and the better part of the 1970s was that the next car would be faster, the next pay cheque fatter and the next house bigger. And that expectation was sustained, by and large, because it turned out to be true. During this period, the middle class grew, each generation surpassed the previous one and dreams were within the grasp of most.

In short, Canadians felt they had a lot to be grateful for, including those who were charting the nation’s course.

This happy condition began to show cracks in the last 1970s when, for the first time in the post-war period, inflation began to erode real income. The recession of 1980-81 and accompanying 20% interest rates put home ownership out of reach for many; while double digit unemployment meant there would be no pay cheques for millions, let alone a fatter one. Ronald Regan tapped into this vein of anxiety in the 1980 presidential debates when he famously asked Americans to ask themselves “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” (as did Joe Clark, less famously in the 1979 federal election, when he asked Canadians whether they wanted four more years like the last eleven). For the first time in three generations the answer was “no”. And for the

first time in three generations, North Americans felt they were falling behind – and they did not like it.

Jimmy Carter disastrously misread this changing mindset, in his ill-timed “Crisis in Confidence” speech where he derided Americans to renew their faith in the country and themselves. His miscalculation was that voters – whether in Canada or the United States – had not lost faith in their country or themselves. What they were losing was their faith in their leaders and their embrace of old solutions to problems that the electorate clearly believed to be new. In fact, Canadians viewed most of the problems they and their countrymen were facing at this time as aberrations; that they neither deserved nor should have to tolerate. Rather than change their beliefs about the inevitability of progress, they began to change their attitudes toward their political leaders. Even in this disgruntled state however, about 6 in 10 Canadians still reported that their impression of politicians was at least somewhat favourable.

And then along came the recession of 1991-2.

The severity of that downturn traumatized many Canadians. For the first time - rather than believe progress was limitless and inevitable, many began to fear that opportunity – at least for some - may actually be shrinking. (Many of you may remember the Liberal’s famous Red Book in the 1993 election but my guess is that few of will recall its title. Tapping directly into the public sentiment of the moment, the Liberals chose the theme of “Creating Opportunity”). Not only were Canadians questioning their faith in the progress ethos, they were also zeroing in on the culprit who they believed was responsible for this shrinking opportunity – namely government, government deficits and government spending. This in turn became the fertile soil where Preston Manning planted the seeds of success for his Reform Party.

Never ones to miss or ignore a trend this large, governments responded with a flurry of activity to privatize crown corporations, slash transfers in social and defence spending and generally to reduce their size and scope of activity. The most obvious manifestations of this response, of course, were Paul Martin’s famous budgets of 1995 and 1996 and Mike Harris’ Common Sense Revolution around the same time in Ontario.

And lo and behold, for many of those who blamed government for this predicament, this retreat looked like it was working. The last half of the 1990s was marked by a growing economy, surging markets and shrinking deficits. In 2000, Stockwell Day, aimed his campaign at the very voters who were so furious with government’s incursion on individual opportunity almost a decade earlier, declaring it was “Time for a Change”. Their response? “Who are you kidding? We don’t want to change anything!”

But under this veneer of prosperity and apparent contentment, we saw another consensus beginning to emerge. In 1996, for the first time in our tracking, we had enough people volunteering “health care” as the most important problem facing the country that it warranted its own code. Their number grew the next year and in every year until 2000, when concerns about health care eclipsed all others and for the first time in three decades, social issues dominated the Canadian public opinion agenda.

Running parallel to an expanding economy, we were witnessing a growing number of Canadians coming to the conclusion that whatever prosperity might be available, it was not being equally shared. And even more alarmingly, that while the economy flourished, our social safety net was being left to unravel. By 2000, unhappiness with the status quo had shifted from essentially angry, white males a decade earlier, to the young, the old, the poor and disproportionately women –

namely those who were most likely to feel prosperity was passing them by or who were most likely to fall victim of an unravelling social safety net. For many, it *was* “time for a change”. Day’s error was that he had aimed his message at the wrong audience.

This period therefore was marked by both a great divide and a great consensus in Canadian public opinion. The division revolved around the perceived proper role for government – many faulted government for doing too much but for others the blame was that government was doing too little. Both sides agreed however that government increasingly did not represent their interests or was alive to their needs.

Two decades after the 1981 recession, the number of Canadians holding at least a somewhat favourable impression of politicians had fallen in half.

The events of the fateful day of September 11, 2001 unquestionably seized Canadians attention, but to our surprise didn’t really change the public opinion agenda but merely added one more layer of concern to it.

As we entered the 21st Century, markets did not look quite so triumphant. As the decade unfolded, business no longer seemed quite so efficient or capable of using its invisible hand to guide the economy. And as liquidity froze and global stability was threatened by a three year credit crisis, governments don’t look quite as irrelevant as they did a decade ago.

Yet our faith in our political leaders continued to decline. In 2005, we asked whether Canadians believed politicians shared their view of what was the most important problem facing the country. Then, a shocking 62% replied in the negative. We repeated the question this year and that number had grown to 76%.

Michael W goes Acoustic and I Have a (Small) Epiphany

The roots of our mistrust clearly run deep, and during the 1980s and 1990s seemed to be directly linked to a cause and effect relationship where voters were wanting or expecting one thing and government failed to respond accordingly. In 1980-81, incumbent governments were viewed as tone deaf to public anxiety and new realities. The antidote was the election of “change agents”, like Ronald Regan, Margaret Thatcher and Brian Mulroney who promised a sharp departure from the past. In 1991-2, government activity itself was seen as limiting individual opportunity. Deficit reduction and spending cuts was the salve that was applied to that wound. In 2000, Canada’s most vulnerable felt abandoned as government sat idly as inequities grew.

But what is more curious is what has happened in the last decade. On one hand there is no question that the erosion of public trust in our political leaders continues its downward trend. But on the other hand, you are hard pressed to identify the same cause and effect relationship where government activity (or inactivity) could be credibly blamed for the public’s disquiet. In fact, if any aspect of public opinion has characterized the first decade of the millennium, it is how little Canadians expect or demand of their governments and how disengaged and unaffected they feel from and by the whole political process.

I was pondering this quandary the last time I was in New York, when I ventured onto Bleeker Street to catch the early sets at the seminal folk-rock venue, The Bitter End.

The opening act was a three piece alt-rock outfit, fronted by a bespectacled, baseball capped, singer-guitarist by the name of Michael W. To my surprise and delight, they were very good – not

quite ready for the big stage, but certainly beyond competent. They played original material that had a Tracy Chapman/Ben Harper rhythmical, not-quite-rock-but-not-the-acoustic-singer-songwriter thing going on. The crowd responded to their first few songs with something between courtesy and enthusiasm.

It was all very pleasant when something completely unplanned and unexpected happened. A few bars into about the fourth song in the set, W's electric pick-up popped out of his hollow-bodied guitar. Rather than stop the song and repair his now obviously dysfunctional instrument, he leaned over to his piano player and whispered (the club is intimate enough that you actually can hear such things from the audience) ... "we have to go acoustic". The keyboardist turned off his instrument, the drummer avoided the skin of his snare and merely tapped out the beat on the rim of his kit and W began to sing off mic. Within a few seconds, the normal ambient din of a rock club slid into absolute silence. Stripped of all reverberation, the cadence of W's voice seemed far more assured yet nuanced, while his guitar playing was unquestionably more dynamic and muscular. Robbed of his instrument, the keyboardist had little choice but to move closer to center stage and he and W began singing *to each other* and produced some of the most beautiful harmonies I have heard in a rock club. As the last chord was struck, the room literally exploded with rapturous cheering, hooting and applause.

It wasn't at all clear that the Michael W band fully understood what they had created, because with equipment repaired, they never again even came close to connecting with the crowd in the same way for the remainder of their workman-like set. But we in the audience knew we had witnessed something very magical and rare – unscripted, unrehearsed, naked authenticity. The band had ceased to "perform music" and instead had *communicated* with us and among themselves with a joy and passion, without artifice.

Reflecting on the profound disengagement between the electorate and our elected leaders, I couldn't help but connect the two and think that maybe the remarkable effect Michael W acoustic mis-step had on the audience, might contain a lesson for our politicians.

Granted, citizens can point to plenty of grim and tangible evidence that their trust in traditional leaders has often been misplaced. They left religious teaching to the clergy only to discover that their children were molested by them. They entrusted their life's savings and now find that it is not uncommon for bankers to put other's money at risk by betting against the market, at the very same time they reward themselves with obscene salaries. And where they once looked to their elected representatives to broker differences and serve the public interest, they now believe politicians are out-of-touch and deaf to their real concerns.

While headline grabbing examples of malfeasance undoubtedly fuel our growing loss of faith and the anti-elitist sentiment we're witnessing throughout the Western World, something else seems to be at work here as well. As egregious as the evidence of misconduct might be, the fact is that when it occurs, it is an aberration. The average clergyman is not a pedophile, your typical businessperson is not a crook and very few politicians are actually cretins. Given this reality, the defence against the abuse of public trust should be straight-forward – "It isn't the whole barrel. It's just a few bad apples". Yet the public refuses to extend the benefit of the doubt to our leaders and instead, consistently holds the whole to account for the sins of the few. And the cause of this, I think is equally straight forward – even if reason might indicate that bad behaviour is the work of the few, citizens no longer believe that their leaders speak the truth. Therefore the defence is not credible because the defenders are not credible.

For whatever else our leaders' shortcomings, this strikes me as their most systematic failure – they have not picked up on the electorate's craving for authenticity nor adjusted their behaviour to conform to this new reality.

For most of my adult life, I have worked with political and business leaders and have never ceased to be amazed at how different they can be in private compared to their public personae. Time and time again, I have witnessed otherwise funny, thoughtful, caring men and women walk from the wings of the auditorium to the podium, only to be transformed into nothing less than a big, blustering (well, there isn't a polite way of saying it) bullshitter – in effect, offering up a “performance” and a caricature they think they should be playing. Typically, these performances range from pillorying opponents with hyperventilated allegations of failings; feigned outrage at what others would consider modest grievances; taking exaggerated credit for accomplishments that are better shared; and avoiding any direct and honest engagement of difficult subject matter that has the potential to cause media controversy.

What made these performances unbearably grimace-making however, was not the content of the remarks so much as the speaker's complete lack of self-awareness or appreciation that they were the only person in the room who found their narrative believable.

This tendency is new on the part of our leaders. In fact, most modern-day politicians are aping the behaviour of their predecessors who they continue to try to emulate.

But if hyperbole in politics hasn't changed, everything else has.

Why We Crave Authenticity?

So if politicians haven't changed, why have we evolved from a culture that was once deferential to our political leaders to one that is now disdainful?

First, it strikes me it is no coincidence that we have grown more distant from our leaders at the very same time as we have become linked to the world and each other in a way never imaginable even a decade ago. The first manifestation of an explosion of new technologies, digital media and social networks is that individuals now feel more knowledgeable, efficacious and in control of their personal lives.

If we need access to our bank account, we are no longer limited to “banker's hours”, standing in line, waiting for a teller to deign to hand over our cash. We can now go on-line 24/7. If we want to watch a recent Hollywood release, we have video-on-demand (the more net-savvy - and larcenous – among us have even found ways to see movies still in the theatre by down-loading from sites such as Pirate Bay). While shrinking numbers still do, why wait for the 10 o'clock National News when you can chronicle current events in real time, throughout the day?

In short, if we don't tolerate any guff from our bankers, cable providers or news makers, why would anyone think we would stand uncritically and passively by and accept the word of our political leaders as gospel?

Secondly, not only has this technology allowed us to take more control of our lives, it has also connected us to others in intimate and immediate ways, like never before. We now share our day-to-day activities and experiences with notional “friends” on Facebook. When we enter the Tweeterverse, even the most introverted and solitary can gain “followers” who seem interested in

our most mundane thoughts. And of course, if we want to know what's up with the Kardashians, Snooky or the Real Housewives of Orange Country, they all seem more than prepared to expose their wicked temperaments and talents to us, week in and week out.

Thirdly, the combination of a more efficacious and connected public, in turn, has directly reduced our reliance on and *need* for authority. Vacationers no longer need to turn to travel agents for advice, as they can now consult and review peer experiences on Trip Advisor. Chow Hounds offers more, and is considered a better source of restaurant reviews than is available through established food critics. The website Yelp rolls all of this into one and allows you to get citizen recommendations on everything from haircuts to auto dealers. Everywhere we turn, the evidence is the same – where traditional authorities have not been able to adapt and find a unique voice in this new discourse, they become functionally obsolete.

At one in the same time therefore, technology has disintermediated citizens from traditional authority and allowed us to plug directly into the world and an alternative social network. The by-product of our more distant relationship with authority and our more direct relationship with our peers is that we are now constantly enveloped with the pretext of intimacy and realism. Not only is our ever-more connected and plugged-in citizen confronted with realism in their day-to-day lives, he and she now demands authenticity from their leaders as atonement for the deceit they believe is being perpetuated upon them.

We crave authenticity then because, as individuals, we have become saturated with authenticity in our day-day-lives – we are informed, connected and can respond in real time, at any time. Yet as citizens, we are deprived of authenticity – we feel our leaders do not understand our concerns, share our beliefs and experience or speak a language we understand. In this new environment, truth has become the oxygen and artifice is the kryptonite of public life.

The Need to Restore Trust in the Public Sphere

Our dilemma as a society however is that while we may have cast aside our deference to authority for defiance, the fact remains that neither our friends, followers nor Kim Kardashian are much help when it comes to making sense of or having much impact on the big, scary world beyond our social network or reality television.

We may no longer revere, trust or follow our traditional leaders, but whether we like it or not, they still have their hands on the tiller of the ship that steers the real world.

So even if we are now less deferential to our traditional leaders, and more efficacious and cynical as individuals, it may also be that this cultural shift has rendered us more insecure and vulnerable to the larger uncertainties that we *cannot* control through technology and social media.

Given this fundamental fact of real politic – and if I am right about the public's sense of vulnerability in our newly connected world – then surely, this insecurity should drive individuals into the arms of their leaders, however reluctantly.

Well, no. Because, while our politicians, clergymen and bosses may have noticed progressively lower rates of voter turnout, shrinking church attendance and falling union membership – some may have even embraced Facebook and Twitter – by and large, they continue to go about their business and behave pretty much as they always have.

Most often short of outright lies, our elected leaders seem to have become congenitally unable to speak the unvarnished truth – and everyone knows it. Like the travel agent, or restaurant critic, our leaders run the risk of becoming moribund because they have not been able to modulate their behaviour or find their voice in this new reality. Indeed, terrifying as it may be for some, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that more people identify with Snooky from the cast of the Jersey Shore than Stephen Harper simply because she is more interesting and authentic than the Prime Minister.

The genuinely disengaged would probably respond to all this with a shrug and “who cares?”

Growing up on the Canadian prairies in a good United Church family, there was very little in my upbringing that indicated I would care about politics or government either.

That all changed one uncommonly wintery morning in October, 1970.

I was in my second year of a combined BA-LLB program at University of Alberta and was well on my way to being admitted into the bar before I was 22. As was my habit, in the gloom of that Edmonton morning, I swung by to pick up one of my class mates to drive him to the 9am Canadian politics course we took together. When he got into the car, without greeting, he asked ... “So how do you like living in a country with no civil rights?” While I had been vaguely aware of the tensions that were occurring in Quebec over a political kidnapping, by and large, I had no clue what he was referring to. He patiently explained that the Prime Minister has just introduced the War Measures Act, functionally putting the country under martial law and legally removing the right of habeas corpus.

While this new information had little direct bearing on the life of an 18 year old more interested in Woodstock than the National News, it did strike me as a bit outrageous that it was within the power of anyone to take away my rights.

When we got to class, my classmates were abuzz, with most talk centering around a belief that such action was necessary to “catch the frogs who did this” and “to restore order before things get even more out-of-control”.

The class was taught by a 30 year old graduate from Simon Fraser University, named Thelma Oliver. She was a self-professed socialist who drove an E-type Jag and was the most exciting and alluring person I had ever met. And she proceeded to give a lecture that still resonates with me to this day.

She re-affirmed my friend's assessment that indeed we were now living under martial law and that any of us could be detained without charge. Rather than explaining this development in terms of the need to “catch the frogs” or “to restore order” however, she made the case that this was one of the natural extensions of entering into civic society and allowing ourselves to be governed.

Drawing on classic political theory, Professor Oliver made the point that as part of the social contract rendered by being part of civil society, we implicitly give up our right to unbridled individual freedom in exchange for collective stability and safety. But to ensure that the balance of that relationship was never tilted dangerously against certain fundamental rights that were guaranteed by the state, it was necessary for citizens to be ever vigilant and prepared to remove those who abrogated rights – by ballot, preferably but by rebellion if necessary. She then went on to make the point that the skein that wraps the social contract and makes it function is the political process, which in turn, confers upon those who run it, a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.

I thought ... “a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence”... now that, is a very heavy –and scary – concept. And so I asked, “How can individuals rebel if we give those who run the political process a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence?” (A shorter version of) her response was ... “You have identified the conundrum of democracy, my friend. Because when you give up some of your unfettered rights, you always run the risk of losing more. And there is a very bloody history of those who have fought to get those rights back. That is why the foundation of democracy is trust – that citizens must trust that their leaders will not misuse their power and leaders trust that citizens will find casting a ballot a more acceptable way of being held in check than a bullet”.

It took a while for the implications of Thelma Oliver’s lecture to sink in – and arguably a lifetime in politics to learn – but that day, it dawned on me that government wasn’t “them” it was “us”; that for good or ill, this is the way, as a society, we have chosen to organize and manage our collective affairs. That government has the capacity for infinite good and infinite evil, in equal measure. And because of that capacity, government can never be considered “irrelevant” and trust never taken for granted. It’s simply too important.

Can Authenticity Restore Trust?

Maybe I’m naive or perhaps it’s just wishful thinking, but everything I know about public sentiment tells me that authenticity is not only the glue necessary to repair this breach between our citizens and politicians, I actually believe that telling the naked truth, in today’s environment, can be extremely good politics.

And I would submit that there is growing evidence that I may not be wrong in this assumption.

How else do you explain a socially progressive, Muslim being elected the mayor of Cowtown; and at the very same time, a leather-lunged, no necked, know-nothing capturing the imagination of Canada’s cultural and intellectual epicentre? Not only do these victors and victories play against type, they also fly squarely in the face of traditional patterns of partisanship; where Torontonians for decades – both federally and provincially – have elected Liberals and New Democrats and Calgarians – for even longer – have consistently sent Conservatives to Legislatures.

The first part of the answer is that disengagement from the political process has meant that traditional patterns of partisanship matter little in determining voting choice any longer. Attachments to political parties are so weak that all elections have the possibility of massive volatility and now, personality can easily overarch traditional party loyalties. The larger part of the answer is that both Rob Ford and Naheed Nenshi represented the anti-thesis of what Canadians today typically associate with politicians.

Asked how often a typical politician would tell the absolute truth when making public statements, 4 out of 10 Canadians claimed less than 50% of the time. 1 percent believed politicians are absolutely truthful all the time. Think about this. We are not asking what percent of politicians are brilliant or inspirational, simply whether when they speak, can they be believed? And 99% of Canadians are telling us that at some point in time they expect to be lied to by their elected representatives. Almost half of the population believe that any time a politician speaks single, they have a 50:50 chance that they will be told a lie rather than the truth.

The evidence suggests that Ford and Nenshi’s very uniqueness -- and that they were not afraid to hide their uniqueness -- made them seem more authentic and believable – basically, the message these politicians sent the electorate was ... “what you see is what you get”. In Rob Ford’s instance,

his very crudeness and unrefined nature made him seem “real” and signalled he was not trying to hide anything from voters. The fact that their candidacies horrified traditional power brokers also worked in their favour – basically, if the defenders of the status quo were afraid of them, Nenshi and Ford must be “for the people”.

And while these victories were confounding against the backdrop on conventional voting patterns, even more remarkable was what happened to voter turnout. In Calgary, the percentage of eligible voters who went to the polls increased from 33% in 2007 to 53% -- almost a two-third increase in voter participation. In Toronto, the pattern was virtually identical – 35% in 2007, escalating to 53% in 2010.

This, as much as *who* was elected, offers testimony to the power of authenticity. In fact, it demonstrates that low turnout does not have to be the norm but instead is a rational voter response to choices that matter little. If politicians stand for nothing, represent only their own interests and avoid the truth, why would you go to the polls? When politics is made to matter by politicians who represent an authentic alternative to the other available choices, the evidence suggests that voters will engage.

This is the other side of voter cynicism that politicians seem to have completely failed to understand. Having concluded there are no longer any *great* men or women, the public now seeks out *good* men and women. The thirst is no longer for perfection but for the demonstration of character - of the real self and a “glimpse into the soul”. In fact, the irony of course is that – having concluded they are not deities – the public is now more willing to accept the human failings and shortcomings of their leaders... *if they fess up and put them on display*.

What Would Authenticity Look Like?

I love Rex Murphy. He is unquestionably one of the country’s most gifted and fearless wordsmiths. But what makes him a national treasure is that his million dollar vocabulary is matched with the sensibilities of the average person on the street. In the middle of the last federal election – obviously frustrated by the absent of meaningful debate – Rex unleashed a rant that elicited more response than anything else he as ever broadcast.

It was a message aimed not at the television audience, but at political leaders and offered the most commonsensical and practical advice on authenticity I have ever heard. His starting premise was that people would start to engage in the election when politicians stop being false. A shortened version of the counsel he offered bears repeating here:

1. Let’s put a stop to “political speak”: End all the bafflegab phrases designed to conceal meaning; all the apocalyptic rhetoric. It’s possible to talk about your opponents without making them sound like villains in a cheap B-movie.
2. Stop claiming to be the one exception: I don’t care which leader claims he or she is the only one interested in ordinary Canadians – as opposed to their rivals who are just power-hungry, slope-browed, greedy-for-vote-hypocrites – the claim a) isn’t true; b) doesn’t sound true and c) this is most important, gives sensitive people a pain in the gut.
3. Cancel all the prepared ads, all of them, every one: I cannot remember a political ad that is not tone deaf, unpersuasive, grating on the nerves and an insult to the intelligence of a cold rock.

4. Why is it so hard for leaders to say what they think in words they would normally use? Three sentences of what they actually, really mean, in their own voice and words – would change the style of politics forever.

In summary: Throw out the scripts. Talk to the people – really. Decide the three big issues and deal with them at length. End the ads. Stop sounding professionally pious. Speak from the top of your head and the bottom of your heart. And finally, tell us why your party is right, not why the others are wrong and evil.

So what would our response be if politicians – like the Michael W band - got “unplugged”; ceased their “performance” as politicians; and offered us their authentic self?

And if they did this not simply by speaking in a style that was believable, but also said things that they really believed.

What if someone stood up and said:

“Our treasured health care system is not sustainable in its current form. We have to move away from a hospital centric system, focused on acute care to a wholesale decentralized one that is geared to a continuum of care which will require a massive investment in information technology. Those funds are not going to come from general government revenues because the taxpayer would not tolerate the burden it would impose on house-hold income. Moving in this direction is not optional; it has to begin right away; and will mean that we will inevitably have to offer more services through the private sector and on a user pay basis.”

Or;

“We must invest in new environmental technologies and alternative energy but no one should expect this to be a panacea or a wholesale replacement for fossil fuels. This is the reality of our economy and a major part of a lifestyle that we have come to enjoy and expect. But if we are to take our responsibility seriously - as stewards of the planet and parents to our children – we must commit to reducing our carbon emissions. For the foreseeable future there is only one way to do that and that is to monetize and tax carbon.”

Or;

“If we value our reputation as one of the most welcoming and tolerant countries in the world, we have to stop patting ourselves on our backs for our past success in absorbing new Canadians into the fabric of our nation and take a hard look at our multicultural policy. This is a policy that was developed 40 years ago and designed for an immigrant population that was almost exclusively European, Christian and white. Nothing could be further from the case today. Today, first generation immigrants are falling behind, and compared to past generations, their children are significantly less likely to have a sense of belonging as Canadians. It’s time for a new Royal Commission on Multiculturalism to determine what is working and what is not and to develop new policies and programs for the parts that aren’t”.

Or;

“Canada has a productivity problem that – compared to the United States - robs every Canadian of approximately \$10,000 per year. Our business leaders urge us to solve this by lowering taxes,

offering more incentives to conduct research or to purchase new machinery and equipment. Well, the fact is that over the last decade, governments have spent billions of tax payer's dollars on precisely these things and businesses have pocketed the cash and made no progress in closing our productivity gap. So it's time to adopt a different approach. We should set national goals to eliminate the drop-out rate in High Schools; to make sure that single mothers never had to go on welfare; to reverse the fortunes of aboriginal youth and make it more likely that they would actually graduate from High School than become incarcerated; to commit ourselves to do more to integrate new Canadians into the economy so they would not be earning only 68% of what comparably qualified second and third generation Canadian's make. And if anyone is worried about how to would pay for these productivity improvements, don't. We will introduce a 65% marginal tax rate on all individual annual income over \$1 million".

I'm not qualified to suggest that these are policies we should actually be adopting. But I do think that we do a disservice to Canadians and our future if we fail to have blunt, open and honest debate over issues like these, where real choices are offered.

What would Gordon Osbaldesten Do?

So back to the earlier, unanswered question ... "what would the response be if a politician stood up and said these sorts of things?"

Having been involved in the political process all of my adult life, I am fairly confident that anyone making these statements would be crucified and roundly pilloried by journalists and opponents alike. The press would declare that a grievous strategic error had been made. Pundits would declare that the speaker clearly was politically incompetent because everyone knows that Canadians will not countenance private sector involvement in health care; and that a carbon tax is tantamount to political death; and as a symbol of our national character, multi-culturalism is a sacred trust.

The sad irony of this inevitable attack is that the same people doing the pillorying know that our health care system isn't sustainable; that monetizing carbon is the only short term way to reduce carbon emissions; that cracks are beginning to show in our multi-cultural fabric; and that productivity isn't simply a question of graduating more Phds but also requires moving the marginalized in society into the mainstream. We know these things the same way we know that our treatment of Aboriginal peoples is a national disgrace; that we might "punch above our weight" in international affairs because of our military commitments but absent an equal emphasis on diplomacy and soft power, hard power will do nothing to secure a seat on the Security Council the next time one becomes available; and that we can't solve the plight of major metropolitan centers by ad hoc offers of small bites of federal and provincial taxes. In fact, we know there is a whole constellation of policies that are not working optimally and require serious debate and review.

This is not an agenda that calls for complacency, inaction or timorousness, my friends. In fact, without bold and innovative ideas to tackle these problems our nation will inevitably drift and then decline, and trust in the public sphere will surely erode even further.

So if we know all these things, why has telling the truth become bad politics?

A number of years ago I was giving a talk to the Public Service's Association of Professional Executives. My topic was innovation in public policy and how much of the unhappiness with government at the time was rooted not so much in a belief that government was incapable of solving national problems but that it lacked the creativity and innovation to tackle new realities in

new ways. During the Question and Answer session, a bright, young civil servant asked me to expand on this idea and give him some concrete examples of what innovation in public policy might look like.

I began by demurring that I was not an expert in policy making but did recall how exciting and vibrant policy debate was when I first came to Ottawa in the early 1970s. It was a time when Jean Chretien had issued a white paper that called for the abolition of the Canada Indian Act; Marc Lalonde floated a trial balloon in the form of an Orange Paper about the prospect of moving to a negative tax system and a guaranteed annual income; the idea of tripartitism – integrating business, labour and government into the machinery of national decision-making – was seriously considered. I explained that none of these ideas actually came to pass but man, did their possibility stir things up and create a climate where you believed anything and everything was on the table.

When I finished my answer there was a prolonged and somewhat awkward silence, and then the no-longer-quite-so-eager civil servant, almost absent-mindedly said ... ‘Boy, if we tried to do that today, would be ever get in shit.’

I’m no longer an insider but I do know that there is a prevailing sentiment in Ottawa that politicians are not interested in new ideas and certainly not provocative ones that might be misconstrued by their opponents or the press.

I’m here to tell you they could not be more wrong.

In anticipation of this lecture, I put a few questions on Harris-Decima’s weekly omnibus. One of them was “If a Canadian politician promised to be truthful 100% of the time and you were confident that they were going to keep that promise, how likely is it that you would vote for them?” The question attaches no partisan affiliation or policy position; simply the offer of a politician would spoke the truth. Three-quarters of Canadians reported they would vote for that man or women.

Speaking the truth is not bad politics. We may all have the right to our own opinions but we do not have the right to our own facts. And the idea that you can longer speak the truth with impunity; that government doesn’t matter; or that repairing trust in our public figures and institutions is an impossible or unworthy task is just plain wrong. And those who offer these opinions as fact must be challenged.

And it is also wrong for those who are tasked with serving our political leaders to offer anything less than the absolute best advice, based on the best analysis, whether they want to hear it or not.

Canadians may no longer expect much from government or their political leaders, but trust me, when things go seriously wrong, that is still where they will turn. For government to have the capacity and legitimacy to make the kind of decisions necessary to deal with situations that go seriously wrong, requires trust. I’ve tried to argue today that authenticity – truthfulness, honesty and transparency – is the means to that end. And authenticity begins by being true to one’s self and then speaking and behaving in a way that is consistent to that truth.

So what would a great civil servant like Gordon Osbaldeston do? My guess is that he would not hesitate to speak truth to power. Literally and figuratively.

Thank you.