

F-35s: Why the public isn't outraged



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Last week, CBC's At Issue panel included a provocative exchange about the state of our democracy. According to Andrew Coyne, the Harper government has lied about the cost of the F-35 fighter jets. Coyne is outraged and argues that the very integrity of our system of government is at stake: "[It's about whether we live in a functioning parliamentary democracy, or want to.](#)"

Co-panelist Bruce Anderson disagrees. While it is important for opposition politicians, journalists and others to hold the government to account on such matters, he replied, 70% of Canadians are not even paying attention. The issue just doesn't have the kind of traction Coyne's conclusion assumes.

However, Anderson then goes on to wonder why voters aren't responding. After all, that's what should happen, right? In a democracy, public debate not only calls the government to account; it also informs the public. When things get too far out of line, they are supposed to be outraged.

So, in this view, the really worrying part of the F-35 story is not that the government lied, but that citizens don't seem to care. Why are they tuning-out?

There is work underway that sheds light on this question. It tracks a decades-long shift in our political discourse that may now be reaching a critical point. Let me outline some of the findings.

Democratic debate rests on a basic distinction between *needs* and *wants*. For example, serious issues around crime, disease or unemployment qualify as needs because the failure to address them imperils the community. Those seeking office are expected to propose a plan to address urgent needs and the public's job is to consider and choose between them.

Debate can also focus on wants. Citizens in a particular community might want paved streets or a new park and a candidate may increase his/her chances of winning by offering these.

The point to note is that, while both needs and wants are important, political debate has dealt with them differently. First and foremost, politics was about meeting needs. This, in turn, meant the community had to sort out its priorities. Sometimes people even had to forego their own needs to address the more urgent needs of others.

Such debate requires a strong sense of common purpose, a belief in the fairness of the process, and high levels of trust in the leadership. The language of needs plays a critical role here. It has a moral force that leaders can invoke to command attention, demand sacrifice and call for action.

By contrast, the language of wants is more conditional — even optional. It is about benefits, often targeted at a select group as a luxury or a reward. The relationship this creates is very different. The leader is offering, and each citizen is free to accept or not, according to his/her wishes.

Historically, politics focused on needs first and wants second. Over the last few decades, however, an explosion of new tools and techniques has led political parties to focus more on wants and less on needs. In particular, political parties have found they could use public opinion research to identify wants, and communications and marketing techniques to shift attention from needs to wants or from one want to another.

This appeals to strategists because wants are optional and flexible in a way that needs are not. If a government cannot satisfy some want, it can shift its focus onto another. By contrast, needs are persistent, demanding and often complex. Arbitrating between them can be difficult and divisive.

Susan Delacourt has been researching this trend. She calls it “consumer politics” because of the emphasis on wants. Ever more sophisticated tools, she tells us, have now turned consumer politics into a high art:

“In the past decade, all the political parties have been amassing huge databases, filled with personal information about voters... It’s all about “micro-targeting,” the big new thing in politics, allowing parties to tailor-make their advertising, platforms and even “boutique” tax policies [to suit the constituencies whose support they’re courting.](#)”

For present purposes, let’s just note that consumer politics is about more than a change in language and tone. It is about a change in the relationship between government and citizens. Increasingly, citizens are asked to see themselves as consumers of a range of products and services provided by politics/government.

Now let’s return to Anderson’s question about why citizens are not outraged over the F-35s. Consumer politics suggest an answer: the sense of public ownership and responsibility for the political process has been seriously weakened. Government, citizens are constantly told, is like a business.

But consumers do not own or run the businesses they shop in. Nor are they responsible if a business fails, anymore than they should take credit if it succeeds. Their role is focused on purchasing and enjoying the products and services.

So, in this view, if the public is increasingly disengaged from politics, this is due in large part to the political class, which has encouraged them to see political participation more in terms of costs and benefits than rights and responsibilities.

If so, things may be about to go from bad to worse. In the current era of cuts to government services, bad news, and nasty politics, we can expect the customers' "loyalty to the brand" to be sorely tested — leading more and more of them to feel they have no meaningful connection with politics at all.

There is an alternative. It starts with recognition that the role of political debate is not just to hold government to account or even to inform the public. It is also to *engage* the public. How our leaders speak to citizens affects how they understand their relationship to government and, ultimately, their role in democracy. The first step in turning things around is to speak to citizens as citizens, rather than simple consumers.

In conclusion, if Coyne is right that the F-35 story leaves democracy hanging in the balance, then it is not just the government that is to blame. Insofar as the policy community as a whole is playing into the consumer narrative, we are all complicit. Doubt this? Ask yourself: how much airtime was given to deciding whether the purchase 65 F-35s was about meeting real needs, rather than satisfying someone's wants?

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