

It's the process, stupid!

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In a recent iPolitics column, Daniel Veniez writes eloquently about the [erosion of public trust in politics](#). The reasons are pretty clear, he says, and he gives the following example:

In British Columbia, Gordon Campbell was forced to resign because he was re-elected with a majority and had never uttered a word about his intentions to reform the tax system. Not a single peep. Less than three months later his government announced the Harmonized Sales Tax. No consultation. No preparation. No White Paper. No nothing. What citizens objected to was not necessarily the HST... but to what was, by omission, a flagrant lie.

A friend of mine has a name for such eruptions of public anger. He calls it “the process objection.” It says that people are increasingly resentful of political leaders who think they have a right to make decisions without a clear mandate.

The process objection stems from what Neil Nevitte famously called the “decline of deference.” In effect, Canadians no longer treat leaders with the kind of deference and respect that earlier generations did. As a result, the public today is far less inclined to defer to leaders, and increasingly likely to demand a say on big issues.

New Brunswick provides a good example. In the spring of 2009, Hydro Quebec made a secret proposal to Premier Shawn Graham's government to buy New Brunswick Power. Graham liked the offer and made a surprise announcement that the government was going to sell. He said the deal was too good to pass up, but that the government had to move quickly, so public consultation was not an option. From time to time a premier has to make such decisions.

The public saw things differently. Support for the Liberals plummeted and the government was tossed out in the next election. The decision to push ahead without seeking public approval was seen as a serious violation of public trust — the process objection.

The internet revolution is ratcheting-up this tension. Events now move so fast and issues are so interconnected that it is all but impossible for a political party to predict what its major priorities will be over a four-year period, if it is elected. Much will be dictated by circumstances.

Thus George W. Bush's presidency was defined by a sudden and unexpected attack on the World Trade Centre. The near collapse of the financial system forced Barack Obama to make huge budget decisions that will shape the agenda for years, if not decades.

Given the volatility around events, some flexibility on the scope of political mandates is necessary and the public has been relatively accepting of this. However, as Veniez notes, political leaders seem to be pushing the limits.

Consider the Harper Government's abrupt cancellation of the mandatory long-form census. This was not discussed in the election campaign; it was not the result of a public debate; and it was not a housekeeping matter for its home department, Statistics Canada. Indeed, the department head resigned over the matter.

So what was the justification? According to the government, the census infringed people's privacy by gathering unnecessary information about their personal lives. This defense goes to the heart of the trust problem raised by Veniez.

Public trust in politics is closely linked to the idea of a mandate. Political parties make their promises in election campaigns and people choose their government based on the campaigns. That's the deal. But campaigns and platforms are changing in a way that now threatens to break the deal.

Uncertainty about the future makes parties increasingly reluctant to make major promises that are clear. They're much more likely to reel off slogans, such as promising to "crack down on crime," or "make rich corporations pay."

When a party leader wins the election, however, there is a tendency to treat the slogans as policy commitments that the leader has a mandate to act on — except now he/she gets to interpret them pretty much however he/she sees fit.

Thus the Harper Government seemed to be implying that, because the Conservative Party opposes statist intrusion on individual liberty, the Conservative government has a mandate to kill the census.

This, of course, is not how democracy works and everyone knows it. Ideological slogans can be used to justify almost anything. In a democracy, if a government wants to move ahead with a project for which it has no mandate, it should consult with the public and get one.

This raises a further problem. Consultation processes have become even more politicized than mandates. Consider the process on the northern gateway pipeline. Some 4,500 people have asked to appear before the committee, which Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver says will tie it up for three years. The minister claims that the environmentalists are trying to 'game' the process.

He has a point. Whatever the environmentalists may say, their primary interest is not democracy, fair play or serious public debate. They already believe their cause is just and they will use the process any way they can to win.

In response, the minister is now talking about "limiting" the consultation process. Unfortunately, most people don't trust the minister any more than they trust the environmentalists. When he says he wants to limit the process, they suspect he really wants to control it.

If this is the plan, the minister should beware. Veniez is quite right: public trust in politicians is bottoming out. If they think a leader is abusing the system, their anger can become explosive. Just ask Shawn Graham or Gordon Campbell.

On the other hand, maybe the minister really is planning to do some much-needed work on process. That would be welcome news. The public policy process is broken and badly needs to be fixed. We need a new generation of public processes that can resolve complex issues efficiently, effectively and fairly. The northern gateway might be a fine place to start.

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