

March 13, 2012

Ottawa *Watch* 338: Ethics vs. morality

By Lloyd Mackey

Such illustrations come up periodically but not often enough to suggest that the whole system is corrupt.

How often do individuals or groups, believing they are on the highest moral ground, fall into ethical lapses that bring harm to their own political or religious stance?

That sort of question has been floating around the hallways of Parliament the past couple of weeks, as the “roboscam” and other related issues have been playing themselves out.

I will try not to sound too partisan, in commenting on this issue and its ramifications for democracy and the faith-political interface. But there were a couple of things occurring in and around The Hill that call for some examination.

Often, in sitting on the edge of groups of people involved in political or religious strategy, I am struck by the fact that some in a group will believe so strongly in the morality of their position that they will neglect to consider the ethical implications of what they are doing in defence of that position.

Let’s try for three examples. One involves a worker for a candidate who is part of the incumbent governing party. The second focuses on a worker for a candidate who is part of the opposition. And the third relates to a worker whose commitment is to one party, who decides to work for an opposing candidate as sort of a Trojan Horse. (I encourage readers who are not familiar with that term to Google it for explanation.)

Here, respectively, are the three examples:

- A political worker for a governing party candidate believes strongly that his or her party is the only one capable of governing with the highest moral standards possible. The worker is so anxious to ensure the re-election of his or her candidate that he or she decides to use new technology to communicate a message about the opposing candidate that is not true.
- A political worker for a candidate who is part of an opposition party believes that his or her candidate is taking a more moral position on certain issues than does the candidate for the governing party. He or she impugns criminality or immoral behaviour with respect to the candidate for the governing party, as a means to dissuade voters from voting for said candidate. To make matters worse, he communicates his message anonymously.
- A political worker who belongs to one party decides to go to work for a candidate in another party. In the process, he or she does some damage to the candidate for whom he or she is working, hoping thus to advance the position of the party of

which he or she is a member. The worker then makes a quick exit, returning to the place from whence he or she came.

Please note that I am trying, at this point, to focus on individual workers because I am making the assumption – justified or not – that the party leadership, is generally trying to run a clean, albeit tough, campaign.

The point worth noting, at this juncture, is that campaigning has changed technically so much, in recent years, because of both advancing technology and finely-tuned micro-marketing.

I am inclined to agree with those who argue that Elections Canada has a responsibility in this matter. But there are other elephants in the room, including some with faith-based faces.

In Ottawa, many faith-based organizations lurk around the edges of the body politic – and even penetrate parts of it on occasion. I would urge those organizations to play a clear role in helping political workers grapple with both moral and ethical issues. And such workers should think about these things before they are into the heat of the battle – just as they should in any other endeavour, whether it is on a family, community or religious level.

Churches and university ministries who are working with political science students are well able, for example, to contribute greatly in this field.

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