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Ottawa *Watch* 267: A new style coming?

By Lloyd Mackey

Are we any closer to a “new style” 12 years later? My suggestion is that it is one step forward and 1.5 steps back. Justin Trudeau’s style does not encourage collaboration. He is too Trudeauesque and not Pearsonian enough, to bring in a couple of blasts from the past. And the Conservatives have had their struggles with the idea of bending toward conciliation or conflict.

Jagmeet Singh’s leadership style in the NDP sometimes shows signs of collaboration with the Liberals, but the class struggle concept in his party probably means co-operation with the Conservatives is a bit of a stretch. Sometimes he heads off in the right direction, in calling for co-operation but then spoils it all but getting in a dig about the business class “making like bandits” – thus reinforcing the “exaggeration” factor to which I referred in this piece.

A collaborative approach. A new style of democracy. The end of the “command and control” era of federal leadership.

Early on in the *Canada at 150* “thinkers” conference that took place in Montreal this past weekend, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff was tossing about several versions of the above words. And he was implying that the party he leads needs to embrace such language.

Well, maybe ...

Actually, underneath the surface we have that, already.

It is called Parliament. But its collaborative potential gets trounced by the twin devils of combativeness and exaggeration.

If Ignatieff really wants to do what Jane Taber of the *Globe and Mail* quoted him as proposing, on March 27, we could soon have “all of the responsible players in one room ... [coming] up with concrete solutions to a problem.”

But wait, there is more. He suggested “what it means is getting a network of deciders together to face common problems.”

Well, interestingly enough, that is what House of Commons and Senate committees are supposed to do. And, each year, a range of decisions are signed into law after passing through these committees and the bodies to which they report.

Of course, the Liberal leader is giving his party enough time to “start” this trend. It will be the year 2017 that Canada turns 150. And Ignatieff, in talking about this new style, was including the emergence of new technology that will permit national “conversations” among people who are in the same cyber-room, if not physically facing each other.

But Ignatieff could have what he wants much sooner, if he was willing to sit down with his opposite number, the prime minister, to talk collaboratively.

Of course, if asked, he is likely to accuse the prime minister of practicing “command and control” and thus preventing collaboration.

Such a comment would be the kind of “exaggeration” referred to above.

Recently unreported, for the most part, is the way in which question period takes place in the House of Commons. Sometimes, the questions posed from the Liberal benches, are “screeches” or “howls” Those dramatic “asks” are designed to plant outrage in the minds of the television viewers who, thanks to a 35 second “grab” are selectively awarded a network’s daily choice of parliamentary “news.”

Then comes the reply. A year or so ago, it would have been vigorous, almost to the point of repetitiveness, attempting to remind those same viewers of the “terrible” things the Liberals did during their 13 years in power.

Steadily and inexorably, the government-side rhetoric has been ratcheted down. Yes, there is the occasional gentle reminder of horrible/terrible governments past. But the answers, while not always as fulsome as hoped for, are generally quiet, orderly and informative.

For his part, the Liberal leader’s own questions have, likewise, become quieter and more reasoned, and, sometimes, a little more modest in tone.

Don’t just take my word for it. If you can spare the time, even once a week, to watch question period on the CPAC channel, you will see what I mean.

I would hold out a bit of hope that separate references to collaboration, on the part of the prime minister and the opposition leader, might begin to meld together.

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It was just one year ago, that your humble scribe wrote a piece that appeared in the *National Post*, suggesting that collaborative governance, under the minority Conservatives, had been the result of the coming together of five – or is it six – different kinds of conservatives. All that was left for that collaboration to become more effective was for the blue liberals, the “urban conservatives”, if you like, to get in a little closer to the governing party.

True, the piece appeared on April 1, with all that might imply in our sometimes mischievous culture.

But, in the year that has passed, the Liberal leader reversed a fall suggestion that the minority government had to go. And, this spring, he has insisted that the Liberals would not block the budget.

Ignatieff still exasperates, occasionally, that “that guy has to go.” (The guy being Harper.) But he speaks increasingly with an aura of sorrow rather than anger.

All this has come, along with Ignatieff’s contention, earlier this year, that Liberals should disabuse themselves of being “Canada’s governing party.”

The Conservatives, for their part, have made some “re-branding” attempts. They suggested at their Montreal convention, following the 2008 election that “the Conservative Party is Canada’s party.” And, more recently, they have been encouraging Canadians to note that their party is “leading and *listening*” (Italics mine.)

Branding is, of course, some distance from the enacting of firm and broadly-based policy initiatives. But both major parties are making some noises that sound, from this corner of the press gallery, like collaboration.

Let’s not write off that idea too quickly.

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