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Ottawa Watch 46: Bullying in the body politic

By Lloyd Mackey

In this particular piece, I picked up on some political analysis which, simply put, strongly suggested that the House of Commons was an “abusive organization.” At the time, ironically, perhaps, the British Columbia legislature had emerged from similar sorts of abusive behavior to become a relatively conciliatory and even collaborative place. The reasons for the contrast between the two houses are interesting and worth examining. The fact is, abusive behavior in parliamentary places comes and goes – and is often shaped by the adversarial nature of the democratic system.

The headline suggested that bullying in the House of Commons is suggestive of an “abusive organization.”

The story connected to the headline appeared in various forms in newspapers across Canada. This particular version appeared in the *Windsor Star* on October 11, under the byline of Raina Delisle of CanWest News Service.

It reported suggestions from Glenn French, president of the Canadian Initiative on Workplace Violence, that the political process is plagued by bullying. French contends that the “ruckus” in the House of Commons is symptomatic of an abusive organization.

“Constant refrains calling someone a liar, eye-rolling, rude hand gestures – we see a lot of this in the House and it is all bullying,” French was quoted as asserting. He maintained that bullying is “anything involving an exercise of power and a pattern of behavior that’s intended to undermine the integrity, well-being and confidence of the victim.”

The *Star* story was in marked contrast to a Keith Baldrey October 5 column that appeared in *Surrey Now*, a CanWest community newspaper serving one of Vancouver’s larger suburbs. Baldrey is the BC legislature bureau chief for BCTV News.

The headline on that story was *BC politics: Legislature is polite – too polite*. The subject matter, in Baldrey’s words, was “the Sherry Charlie tragedy, which involved the death of a 19-month girl in government care.”

But the tragedy itself became a platform for Baldrey to note that the premier, Gordon Campbell, and the NDP leader, Carol James, were spearheading a remarkably high level of debate in the house – and elsewhere in the province where they were making public appearances.

Noted Baldrey: “The new approach is reflective of the personalities of the two leaders, neither of whom has a taste for personal attacks or the dark underside of politics – and they may well insist their caucuses follow their leads until the next election campaign.”

His next three sentences reflected the conundrum that emanates from such un-abusive behavior.

“Good for them. But bad for journalists like me. We rely on a good political fight to tell a good story, and we may not get as many opportunities for that type of coverage now.”

My quick response is that I am sure Baldrey will find a way to adapt.

But the exemplary behavior to which he refers was not how I remembered BC politics when I used to cover it, under premiers Glen Clark, Bill Vander Zalm and Dave Barrett. All three were most combative and the kinds of personal attacks that crossed the floor during their tenures from both sides, were, arguably, excellent examples of verbal abuse.

But something happened, when the present leaders of the government and opposition parties emerged in and around 2001. Campbell and James seemed to reflect a new breed, collaborative to a fault, relatively speaking, in what is supposed to be an adversarial political setting.

The atmosphere in BC was shaped, as well, by the Citizens’ Assembly that put forward an electoral reform proposal which almost passed in a referendum coinciding with last spring’s provincial election. The threshold for passage seemed to be set unrealistically high, in the view of many of the proponents of the reform. So much so that Premier Gordon Campbell says that the referendum will be reset in conjunction with the next provincial election, set for the spring of 2009.

That reform was seen as laying the groundwork for a more collaborative, less adversarial approach to provincial politics. The “polite behavior” activity being encouraged in the provincial legislature is just one piece in the larger reform package.

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I would be remiss, of course, if I failed to bring forward some thoughts for the consideration of the Christian leaders who read *OttawaWatch*, about how they and their followers might encourage a more collaborative, or perhaps even conciliatory, political approach.

For that, I draw on parts of a column appearing in the October 14 issue of *ChristianWeek*, written by Janet Epp Buckingham, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada’s law and public policy director. The sub-head provides the setting for the points she makes. Alluding to the continuing same-sex marriage discussion, it reads: *Christians are being taken to court for expressing their view – but are their messages consistent with the message of the gospel?*

In her carefully-worded column, she asks the questions: “Are Christians really guilty of spreading hatred against gays? Or is there a conspiracy by gays to shut down Christians from saying that homosexual behavior is a sin?”

Her rhetorical reply: “The answer is somewhere in between these two questions.” In her arguments, she clearly states her view that gay activists know the laws that they can use to shut down the heated rhetoric from those who oppose them. But, speaking to her own Christian community, she cautions that “Christians do need to question whether our public expression is consistent with the Christian message.”

She concludes: “The message from the courts so far is clear – Christians who use intemperate language will face consequences. But perhaps the better question we need to ask is: ‘What message are Christians giving to gays and lesbians? Is it consistent with the message of the gospel?’”

Now, there is a rather more muscular form of Christianity, whose advocates would suggest that Epp Buckingham and her ilk are rather anemic in their approach to public policy issues. One spokesperson for that approach told me, not for attribution, a few months ago, that the Evangelical Fellowship is “afraid of its own shadow.”

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The difference between the measured approach exemplified by Epp Buckingham and the more strident actions of the “muscular” types may well lie in their different views on how the gospel best can be communicated. The more strident approach says that communication is sharpened and listeners pay more attention when Christians can goad their opponents into attacking their views. The more measured approach would encourage a stance that protects the gospel from being provocatively misunderstood.

Preston Manning provided some food for thought, when he commented on the faith/politics interface, during a recent Toronto speech introducing the new Manning Centre for Building Democracy. (I should note, parenthetically, that Manning was speaking within the context of encouraging development of a stronger conservative movement in Canada, an objective with which many, but not all Christians will identify.)

Manning called for: “Political orientation and training programs for faith-oriented Canadians with conservative leanings which would ensure that their political contributions are an asset, not a liability, to the conservative movement and a credit, not a discredit, to their faith communities.”