

Bill Rea ? Strategic voting doesn't work



?Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.?

Winston Churchill

Like Churchill, I am a great believer in democracy, although I also agree there are some flaws to it.

One of the big flaws, and one of the main reasons I enjoy this line of work that I'm in so much, is the way democracy co-exists with stupidity. Indeed, not only does the concept of democracy (in theory and especially in practice) tolerate people being silly, it seems to actively encourage it.

Democracy, especially as it's supposed to be practised in a free society (which is what this is supposed to be), means having the chance to vote at election time (although a lot of people are dumb enough not to, for reasons I have never even tried to understand). It also means having the right to stand up in public assemblies and make a fool of one's self (something I have seen a lot over the last 30 years).

A big part of the problem is too many people tend to cling to their positions, refusing to budge, no matter how sound the arguments to the contrary might be. Granted, there is sometimes political strategy at work. In other cases, people defend a position because they believe they have very large stakes, and they fear they might stand to be out a great deal if certain proposals come to reality. It's perhaps harsh to brand such people with the ?silly? label. If you're trying to raise a family, keep a roof over your head or have all of your wealth wrapped up in a business that you're trying to keep afloat in tough economic times, it's only natural that you're going to be apprehensive of some things, and suspicious of whatever assurances or arguments someone on the other side might offer.

But it's true that change is part of life. Everything changes over time, and that includes opinions. We have brains, and most of us actually use them occasionally. That means we should think about our opinions and beliefs, factor in new details that we have learned over time, and make the necessary adjustments. Most of us have done that at times, with changing our opinions on things we were once passionate about.

The latest example of silliness I've come up against was in the form of a couple of media advisories I received last week.

Did you know there is an outfit called Campaign to Stop Tim Hudak, and it's apparently making the rounds of Ontario. It was to stop in North Bay Saturday, and again in Kitchener, Waterloo and Guelph this past Monday (April 7) and this week in Brampton.

The campaign is evidently the creation of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), and not surprisingly, they are attacking the policies of Hudak and his Progressive Conservative colleagues at Queen's Park.

?Mr. Hudak's entire platform is centred on dismantling the labour movement to clear the way for a low-wage economy,? said OFL President Sid Ryan. ?He isn't fooling anyone. No matter how he tries to massage his message, Tim Hudak is still committed to the same extremist policies that would divide our workplaces, weaken workers' voices and drive down wages for everyone.?

There's nothing wrong or silly about opposing Hudak or the stand that Ryan is trying to promote. I actually met Ryan a couple of times when I worked in the ?big city,? and while our politics would never mesh (don't even think it, Sid), I found him quite a personable fellow to have a conversation with. And indeed, I would have been astonished if any other position came from either Ryan or OFL. I also doubt Hudak is expecting an endorsement from this outfit as a possible election draws near.

But what I find bothersome is the negative tone of this ?campaign.?. If you want to oppose Hudak and his party (or any other leader and his or her party), then by all means do so, but don't call it a campaign, and don't treat it like a campaign either.

Although I admit I am not a political strategist, I wouldn't be surprised if a strategy like this backfires on Ryan and company. True,

organized labour has its place, but there are many people who have serious problems with it (either legitimate or perceived). I can't think of a better way to line them all up in Hudak's corner.

OFL and regional labour councils are planning about 20 meetings to train workers to educate their colleagues, families and neighbours about what they call Hudak's hidden agenda. These meetings, according to the advisories I've seen, are closed to reporters, although media conferences are taking place.

This sounds to me like they're trying to set up what's commonly known as 'strategic voting,' and it's been my experience that it seldom works.

In a way, this reminds me of the often vicious opposition Mike Harris faced when he was premier, and some of the harsh things that were said to people who supported Harris and his government (I found out about that end of the deal the hard way).

I was at Queen's Park, in the media gallery overlooking the legislative chamber, the day Harris's first cabinet was sworn in, and my most powerful memory was the angry roar of the crowd outside on the lawns. These people were angry at a man who up to that point had done nothing more reprehensible than win an election. I had always assumed that was permissible in a democracy.

When I see such silly people getting too involved in the political process, I tend to side with the good guys, and such was the case with Harris for the first couple of years of his Premiership. I was working the big urban centre in those days, covering a couple of municipalities, focussing most of my attention on East York, which at the time was Canada's only borough. The mayor of East York at the time was Michael Prue, who today is a member of the NDP caucus at Queen's Park. Needless to say, my pro-Harris editorials at the time earned me some reasonably good-natured ribbing from the Mayor's Office (Prue is far too classy a guy to get vicious).

I broke with Harris over the issue of municipal amalgamation to create what is today known as Toronto. I opposed it because I believed (and still do) that most of the electorate opposed it, and since this is a democracy, their opinions are supposed to count for something.

Although I believed those opposing amalgamation were fighting the good fight, which was incidentally led by the likes of former Toronto mayor John Sewell and a woman of my acquaintance at the time named Kathleen Wynne (yes, that Kathleen Wynne), the effort soon started losing its focus and started doing stupid things. The group leading the fight called itself Citizens 4 Local Democracy (C4LD), and they ended up sticking their snoots into issues that had nothing to do with local democracy, like organizing a protest when former American president George HW Bush came to town. I personally covered that protest, driving home at the end convinced that what I had seen had done more to promote ultraconservatism as a positive political force than Ronald Reagan ever did at his charismatic best.

And when it came time for the next election, C4LD tried to set up strategic voting in the new city. If memory serves, only one Conservative seat changed hands. Big deal!

If outfits like OFL have to resort to those tactics, why don't they just put a Hudak sign on their lawns?