

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Trust a victim of partisanship

Hoping to get opposing political parties to trust each other is analogous to what Mark Twain once said about trying to teach a pig to sing: it wastes your time and annoys the pig.

This is apropos of the current shouting and gnashing of teeth in Ottawa between Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government and the opposition NDP and Liberals when it comes to debating the merits ? or demerits ? of Bill C-51, the government's anti-terror legislation.

Everybody agrees that given the current sad realities we are facing, some sort of anti-terror legislation is in order.

What the opposition doesn't like ? of course ? is the legislation the Tories are offering to deal with what is clearly an extremely vexing problem.

The main complaint ? and it is not without merit ? is that the legislation a)- goes too far in impinging on individual rights and b)- lacks a parliamentary oversight provision which, in theory at least, would stop governments from overstepping their authority.

There is no doubt that the criticism from the Liberals and NDP ? as well as from academia and media sources ? has made some impact, since the Tories plan to roll back two significant proposals in the bill: one, broadening the definition of civil protest so that legitimate domestic protesters can't get caught up in the terrorism laws, and two, editing out a provision which, according to the critics, gave government departments and agencies unlimited freedom to share personal and commercial information about Canadians with foreign governments.

Naturally, when the Tories leaked their intentions over the weekend, the opposition parties complained that the amendments don't go far enough. For opposition parties, government amendments rarely do. But there you have it.

But one of the underlying problems with our current system ? which is what the pig analogy is about ? is that partisanship has become so intense that trying to teach politicians of different parties to trust each other, even when the stakes are as high as they are on the terrorism file, is virtually impossible.

What happens as a result is that governments ? and not just the current one ? feel they can't trust their political opponents enough to even attempt to run ideas past them without the opponents leaking these ideas to the media to make themselves look good and make the government look bad.

In serious matters of state, mutual trust can be an important tool for getting things done properly.

But when there is a lack of trust on both sides then, alas, things generally don't work out as well as they could and should.

It has become fashionable among the usual suspects to accuse Harper of being secretive and untrusting. And in many respects, it's true.

But on the other hand, can we really expect him to trust the Liberals and NDP with sensitive information only to see them rushing off to their favourite journalist to pass along whatever it is they've been asked to consider in private?

You'll recall the recent kerfuffle made by Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne for a while over the fact that Harper, despite her many pleas ? all of which she made through the media, which tells you how serious she really was about it ? would not meet with her to discuss issues of importance to Ontario.

And although that issue has been dealt with ? they did have a meeting ? Wynne might ask herself why, a year earlier, she came out of a ?private? meeting with Harper and immediately discussed what they'd been talking about and whined that he simply scoffed at her suggestions.

That's hardly the best way to assure a good working relationship, assuming ? which is a big assumption ? that she actually wants that with a Tory prime minister.

Just last week in Ottawa there were two other egregious examples of opposition politicians being unable to keep their big mouths shut over sensitive national security issues.

In the first instance, opposition politicians left a closed-door briefing on Iraq by Mark Gwozdecky, director of the Middle East bureau at Foreign Affairs, only to use the supposedly confidential briefing notes to attack Harper's plans for Iraq.

Earlier, after the Tories gave the opposition parties advance warning about their plans to extend the Iraq mission ? a sign of political good faith, given the seriousness of the issue ? opposition parties immediately leaked the details to their favourite media outlets.

As National Post columnist John Ivison wrote on Saturday, the Tories have been accused of using security as a wedge issue for political gain. ?But there is a genuine lack of trust on the government side ? rooted in the hypocrisy of opposition parties who demand to be treated like grown-ups, while at the same time engaging in the kind of sophomore shenanigans we have seen this week.?

Indeed.

