Citizen initiatives may fill vacuum of political courage

DANIELLE SMITH

OPINION

The impact of this federal election will be felt for a long time. Not only did it set unprecedented records for negative campaigning, but it has boxed so many issues into the closet of political correctness it will be a long time before a politician will have the courage to question convention.

If a Canadian Alliance politician talks about restructuring health care, his opponents say he's an advocate of Americanized two-tier medicine.

If he talks about changing the relationship with aboriginal Canadians, he's intolerant.

If he talks about examining the country's immigration policies, he's racist.

If he wants a clearer definition of sexual orientation, he's a homophobe.

If he thinks there should be some restrictions on abortion, he's sexist.

If he wants to consult the people on issues through citizens' initiative and referenda, he harbours a hidden agenda.

As much as the Liberals try to claim they're the victims of the smear, rather than the perpetrators, they clearly are not.

A Liberal politician can talk about health care, aboriginals or immigration without his opponents resorting to crass name-calling. He can support court-created social policy without shrill headlines about a hidden agenda.

In five short weeks, the Liberals have mastered boiling down complex issues into single-word slurs. In so doing, they have proved that elected politicians have lost the ability to find consensus and common ground and, more than ever, other mechanisms are needed to unlock debate on the issues that matter to people.

Other mechanisms like citizens' initiative and referenda.

A case in point is the abortion issue. Any politician who challenges the status quo gets pilloried by the media, abortion-rights groups and opposing politicians.

Yet when the courts struck down the Criminal Code sections that dealt with abortion in 1988, they never said, "And ye shall never pass laws on this matter again."

What they did say was that the process for approving the procedure, through therapeutic abortion committees, was flawed and cumbersome, and denied a woman her right to security of the person.

However, writing in favour of striking down the legislation, Justice J. Wilson also said that the protection of the fetus "is a perfectly valid legislative objective" and that "Section 1 of the Charter authorizes reasonable limits to be put upon the woman's right."

In fact, the court said a fetus should be treated differently depending on its level of development, suggesting "a permissive approach to abortion in the early stages where the woman's autonomy would be absolute and a restrictive approach in the later stages where the state's interest in protecting the fetus would justify its prescribing conditions."

And where does the line get drawn?

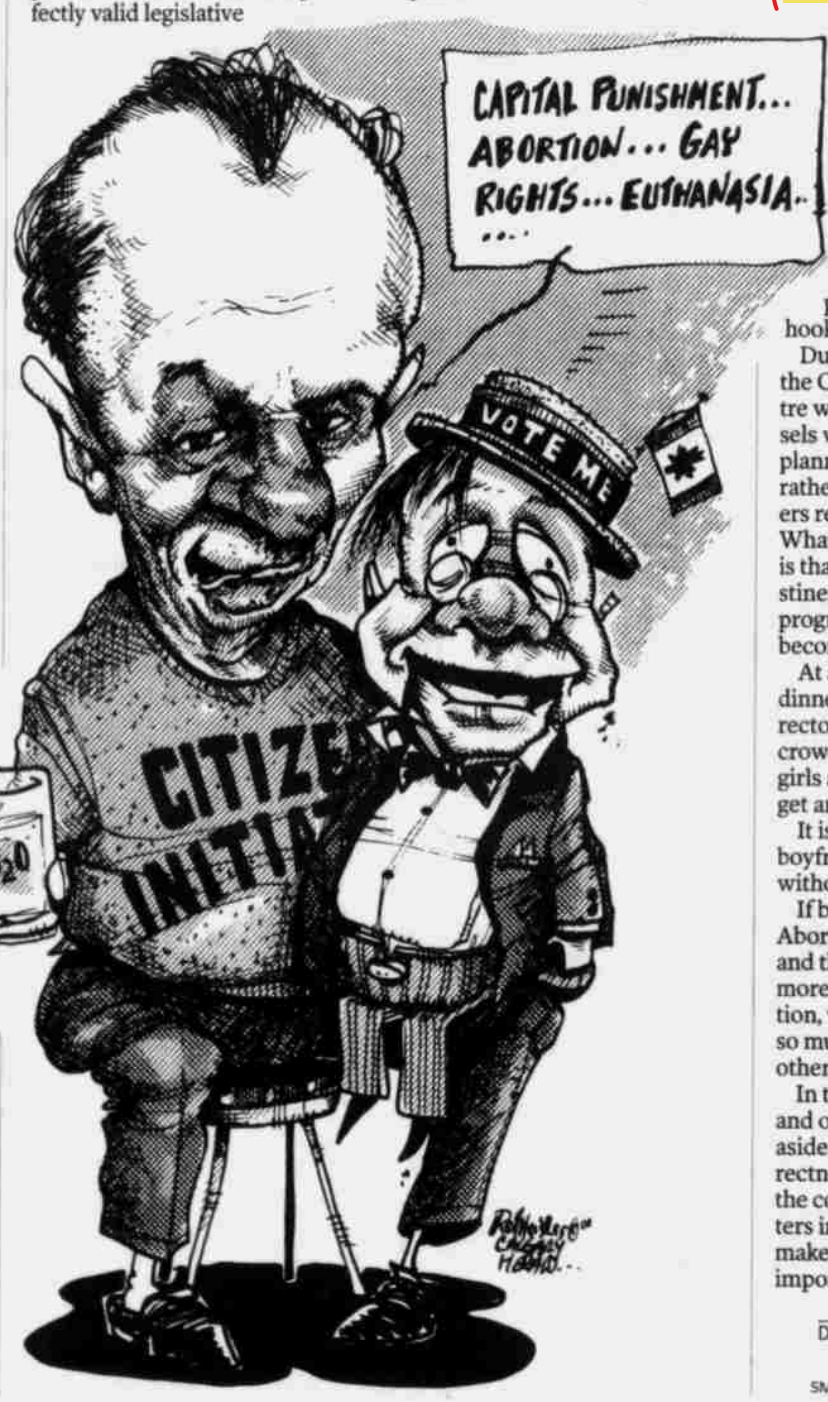
The esteemed court said it "should be left to the informed judgment of the legislature."

The Mulroney Tories tried to pass a new abortion law, which was defeated in the Senate in 1991, and no government has had the courage to venture forth since.

Yet second- and third-trimester abortions are a horrific practice.

Recently, Calgary's Foothills Hospital changed its policy for how it deals with late terminations. Nurses used to induce labour then withhold fluids from the baby until it died. Now they inject sodium chloride into the fetus's heart, killing it before inducing labour.

Another method, used in the United States, the so-called partial-birth abortion procedure, forces the fetus into the birth canal; it's then stabbed in the base of its head, its brain is sucked out and its skull is crushed before it's born.



Most Canadians respect a woman's right to choose, but I bet they also believe her choice can be made well before the third trimester. Most Canadians respect that the decision is between a woman, her doctor and God, but I'm sure they also agree that the taxpayer should not be on the hook to pay for it.

During the federal campaign, the Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre was vilified because it counsels women to carry an unplanned pregnancy to term, rather than provide unwed mothers referrals to get abortions. What the news stories didn't say is that the centre also offers an abstinence-based sex-education program to local schools, which is becoming increasingly popular.

At a well-attended fund-raising dinner last month, executive director Wendy Lowe told the crowd that the question teenage girls ask most often is not how to get an abortion.

It is: "How do I tell my boyfriend I don't want to have sex without hurting his feelings?"

If both sides — the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League and the pro-life lobby — spent more time answering that question, we might not have to spend so much time arguing about the other.

In the meantime, this debate and others should not be shunted aside for the sake of political correctness. If politicians have lost the courage to bring difficult matters into the public forum, it makes citizens' initiative more important than ever.

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CANDIDATES' FORUM

Canada's bright dream needs reclaiming

BARRY RUST
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

Federal candidates running in Calgary ridings are invited to participate in Candidates' Forum by submitting guest columns of 700 words or less which discuss key issues in the riding. Columns should be e-mailed to guestcol@theherald.southam.ca

The words sting, as though it were yesterday.

But it wasn't yesterday; it was nearly 40 years ago, during the first cultural exchange between students from Quebec academia and the University of Alberta.

"You are anglais, and I hate you."

Friends then and now hasten to explain it was not personal. I do understand, but it was still personal. I had been raised to believe in this country and I still believe. That also is personal, as was my offer of friendship and commitment to listen and comprehend the step beyond the "Quiet Revolution."

I learned then to hate separatism, whatever its form of self-defeating, self-righteous, self-justifying negativity.

And there have been many forms of separatism: Quebec, Western, Prairie, Coastal, Ontarian and now Newfoundland. The reasons read like a mantra: the country doesn't deserve saving, the country must be destroyed in order to save it, Canada isn't a real country, and on goes the rationale to get more of what "I want" for me, in a way that is good for me.

Once there appeared to be hope. A party based on the premise "The West Wants In" had to be of some help, even if it did come with a host of reactionary, contradictory, social conservative propositions. The leader was a person of character and principle who initially withstood many unfair attacks from a variety of sources, although he did seem to do all he could at times to confirm the young Quebecois' opinion of me all those years ago.

But again, "voice of the west" was not enough and the Reform party was morphed into some bizarre form, currently called Alliance, though no one knows who or what is allied save Reform and Preston Manning, Stockwell Day and assorted strange bedfellows, and those who claim to speak for government in Ontario, although the government of Ontario claims to neither know nor care.

The goal of the new party, however, is crystal clear. Do what must be done, offer whatever it takes, and make whatever regional sacrifices necessary to get Ontario to vote for us. Gone is the proud history of the Progressives, Social Credit and even the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. All were formed in one way or the other to balance the powerful vested interests of the Ontario elite. But the apparent solution now is to devolve the country so that the most economically and constitutionally powerful provinces will have even more power. With luck and free-trade growth, we can squeeze in. But the rest be damned and summarily cast aside as unfortunate victims of the inevitable.

More importantly, gone is the dream of equal provinces sharing a fair, progressive government, addressing ever-changing social concerns in a climate of free people, free economy and free trade, properly administered, that can bring prosperity for all in Canada.

It takes no genius to see the consequential result of inevitable failure.

I refuse to give up the dream. As hard as it may be for some to accept, there are stronger voices in the Liberal Party for regional and provincial equality, Senate reform including Triple-E, free enterprise and free trade, as well as financial reform and responsibility, than exists in all of the Alliance caucus and their assorted provincial confreres combined.

And they do not come with limp deference to social responsibility, but rather a firm belief that progressive social legislation is both a right and a cornerstone of fiscal success.

In Calgary Southwest, I proudly stand as an alternative route to a common goal.

BARRY RUST IS THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE FOR THE FEDERAL RIDING OF CALGARY SOUTHWEST.

NAOMI LAKRITZ

OPINION

Dealing with death is part of living

I'm waiting for the "h" word to turn up in connection with Samer Jaber's death.

The "h" word is "healing."

I have no doubt that any moment now, someone will utter the familiar mantra that is associated with all tragic events these days. Sooner or later — probably sooner — somebody will say that the healing must begin. You watch. The clichés will start flying. They inevitably do.

After the fatal stabbing of 17-year-old Jaber at Lester B. Pearson High on Monday, the Calgary Board of Education dispatched trauma professionals to the scene to serve up instant solace to the kids.

The off-putting term "structured debriefing" was used to describe the counselling given to witnesses of the stabbing and to Jaber's friends. It's as though death can be cured if only the right textbook jargon is used.

CBE spokesman Dave Pommer says when a crisis occurs, trauma team coordinator Denise Still assesses the situation and can call on a list of extensively trained counsellors for help.

"Even if a child dies off school grounds or in the hospital, this is all assessed. It's to help kids deal with grief," Pommer says.

That's the family's job, not the school board's. Who invited trauma teams into the hearts and minds of our kids?

Remarkable, too, how great philosophers have wrestled for centuries with the problem of pain, yet trauma teams can burst chattily upon a scene and dispense with the problem in a day or so.

Grief, however, is not an instantaneous emotion. It takes its own good time and cares nothing for the professionals who show up at the site of each new tragedy with an alacrity that would put CNN to shame.

This crisis-team phenomenon is a byproduct of two prevailing beliefs in our society — that everything must happen as fast as it can and that people are entitled to feel good. If people do not feel good, then the unpleasantness must be dispelled with professional help as quickly as possible.

What makes these ubiquitous trauma healers so annoying is the quick-fix aura that clings to them. A tragedy occurs, the crisis team arrives, everyone and his dog is counselled for a day or two and then the talk turns, silkily to healing and closure.

Loss — one of the most profound and timeless themes of human existence — is reduced to the status of a flu bug to be eradicated with a spoonful of syrupy talk from professionals who have usurped a role that rightfully belongs to the family.

For it is among their families that children learn over time the hard facts about how loss is lived. They learn how absurd the pat terms of healing and closure really are. Loss does not heal tidily. Death leaves permanent scars and old grief lies in a corner of the heart like a curled-up cat, ready to pounce unexpectedly months or years later and hurt with sharp claws again.

Deceptively soothing jargon about closure lulls children into false security and cruelly sets them up for more pain later when they realize that, although life goes on after a tragedy, its path is forever changed by that loss.

Death has always been a part of life, but there didn't used to be so much noise about its aftermath.

Long before professional carers stepped unbidden into every unhappy picture, people understood a few basic truths that today are in danger of slipping out of sight.

They knew that grief is lengthy, that it inspires deep thoughts and demands quiet privacy. They knew that when others needed to talk about their pain, they turned to family and friends for comfort.

They also understood a tenet that is completely alien to a generation fed pop psychology with its pablum — that one doesn't automatically need professional help to get over the rough spots in life.

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