
Rising Cynicism: Who is to Blame?

by Stéphane Dion

The public image of politics has deteriorated steadily throughout the period for which polls on this question are available. The three most sensitive issues seem to be frankness, probity and misuse of public funds. A growing proportion of the public thinks that politicians lie to them, act dishonestly and waste the taxpayer's money. The unpopularity of politics and politicians would be a healthy sign if it meant that the citizenry were keeping an alert and critical eye on those who govern. But it seems clear that instead it has caused a segment of the population to become cynically indifferent, to give up on everything that has anything to do with politics. This article examines a number of reasons that have been advanced to explain this growing cynicism about our elected representatives, including the effect of the media.

Politicians and political institutions are held in less esteem today than they were ten or twenty years ago. A number of polls have confirmed this decline in Canada, and it seems plausible that the same is true in a number of other democracies. In 1965, for example, 49% of Canadians thought that "the government does not care what the people think". By 1979 this proportion had grown to 53%, by 1984 to 63% and by 1990 to 70%.¹ The levels of honesty and integrity among MPs were judged to be "low" or "very low" by 39% of Canadians in 1982, and by 49% of them ten years later.² While in 1979 15% of Canadians said they felt "very little" respect for the House of Commons, by 1985 the proportion had climbed to 20%, and in January 1993 to 33%. Lack of trust in political parties is following the same upward trend: 22% of Canadians mistrusted them in 1979, 30% in 1985 and 49% in 1993.³

This disenchantment with politics and politicians does have its limits: "Most Canadians do trust politicians very much but the majority of people still feel that politicians

are about as honest as the average person and that there is as much corruption in business as in government"⁴

One reason for the rise of cynicism is the deteriorating economic situation. People like their elected representatives less because the latter are less able to help them. They blame politicians for unemployment, debt, weak growth. In the early 1980s, the Canadian taxpayer got back \$1.20 in services for every dollar he sent to Ottawa, while today he gets only \$0.80 for that dollar – the rest goes to service the national debt. This is a simple explanation for the rising tide of cynicism, but not a complete one: after all, Canada experienced strong growth in the mid-1980s, and yet this did nothing to increase confidence in politicians and political institutions.

Another reason that has been advanced is the disappearance of the old ideological certainties. The disappointments of Reaganite neoconservatism and socialism à la Mitterrand swelled the ranks of the skeptics. People are as disenchanted with the traditional opposition as with the government, and this encourages the emergence of new populist parties whose vocation is primarily protest.

A third explanation frequently offered is that our institutions do not work well. There are in Canada a number of champions of the American system, who claim that our British parliamentary institutions are outmoded, that party discipline in particular is at fault

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because (to their way of thinking) it prevents individual MPs from honestly defending their opinions and the interests of their constituencies. But it must be pointed out that disenchantment with elected representatives is just as strong in the United States, where scarcely one-fifth of the population say they have "a lot" of confidence in Congress.⁵ On the international scene, the search for an institutional solution to politicians' image problems has had contradictory results: Italy, tired of its politicians, is abandoning proportional representation just as New Zealand and Japan are, for the same reason, adopting it.

A more ambitious is offered by those who asserts that democracy is suffering from its own success.⁶ The point is that an anti-power ethic is inherent in democracy. The more the values of equality and liberty become established in people's minds, the more they distrust those who set themselves up as above the people and entitled to govern them. Cynicism about politics and politicians thus gains ground as the pre-democratic values of deference and respect for authority lose their hold. Democracy leads ultimately to nihilism. This is certainly part of the explanation, as the rise of populist values and parties shows. But a more optimistic perspective would be to see the pervasive cynicism as one more stage of democracy rather than its climax. We can hope that education and the habit of public debate will produce a more astute electorate, better equipped to assess the facts and distinguish a critical attitude from blanket rejection. The more education people have, the more likely they are to support the basis of the party system, both in the United States and in Canada.⁷ The progress of democracy could well lead to better judgement rather than to nihilism.

The role of the Media

A final explanation is the effect of the media. A number of factors give the impression that the media encourage cynicism toward politicians. Their well-known natural tendency is to turn the spotlight on bad news -- unemployment, conflicts, internal disputes. Their coverage of parliamentary activities, for example, focuses mainly on clashes during Question Period and not on committee work. A study of parliamentary coverage in Quebec City confirms that the media focus on the sound and fury of political life.⁸ Journalists are generalists whose only real skill sometimes is knowledge of the political game: the way politicians manoeuvre for votes, their rivalries, and so on. Many journalists reach a point where they see nothing but this jockeying for power, and shove the substance of political decisions to the background.

There is no evidence that the print media are more critical than they used to be; indeed, they may even be less so, according to studies done in Quebec.⁹ But over the years the public has increasingly been exposed to information on television, and television has become more critical and independent, starting in the 1970s.

Although journalists are not particularly well-respected, their approval rating too having declined with the rise in cynicism, they are still thought of more highly than are politicians. In June 1986, an Environics poll suggested that Canadians tended to find journalists more reliable than politicians. It would seem, then, that greater exposure to a press, and especially a televised press, that is less deferential than it used to be and that the public regards as relatively credible, may well have contributed to increasing skepticism about politics.

But the effect of the press must not be exaggerated. It may have encouraged cynicism, but it could not have created it. The vigorous competition in the news world is an economic market like any other, with players following the public's taste much more than shaping it. Supply influences demand but it does not invent it.

Nor should we exaggerate the negativity of the political coverage in the print and spoken media. It is not as negative as politicians often think. Plenty of experienced journalists bemoan a lack of independence, curiosity and critical thinking in their profession. A study of the way the chief daily papers and television news broadcasts available in Montreal covered the 1989 election campaign in Quebec found that overall, although the parties were more often judged negatively than positively, the content was much more (75-80%) likely to be neutral than biased in either direction.¹⁰ A similar study of private radio stations would no doubt have found a much higher level of negativity in the content, but the major information media are not characterized by extreme virulence toward politics and politicians.

One of the paradoxes of our time is that new democracies are coming into being throughout the world while established democracies are facing disenchanted voters on the verge of complete cynicism. I have touched on various reasons for this disenchantment, trying to make the point that although the major media may have encouraged it, they could not have created it. If I had to select just one cause for the rise in cynicism, I would choose not the media but rather the collapse of the traditional ideologies. Many voters cannot forgive yesterday's politicians for having wanted to make them believe in miracle solutions. And yet those same voters are not yet ready to accept that there are no miracle solutions. They want today's politicians to tell them the truth, but at the same time they are not always ready to

hear the truth. They want to go on believing, for example, that deficits can be eliminated without new tax hikes or reduced services.¹¹

In a healthy democracy, every citizen has learned to exercise his or her own judgement. Clearly the right route for democracy is neither complacency or cynicism — it is sound critical judgement.

The press can do a great deal to dam the rising tide of cynicism, and I would like to conclude with a suggestion. Editorial writers, and the opinion press generally, should resolve to round off their critiques with concrete suggestions. The things governments and political parties do or propose must be criticized, but possible and desirable alternatives must be put forward at the same time. If the critic has no concrete solution, this should be admitted frankly. We have lost count of the thinkers who reproach politicians for their lack of vision but are themselves incapable of formulating even the first paragraph of an agenda for our society.

Studies show that people are less likely to judge politicians harshly when they are asked questions that invite them to think about concrete problems. This is what the media should be doing: preparing their readers for constructive and pragmatic criticism, so that gradually every citizen will start thinking about constraints and solutions instead of being content to ladle out blame.

Notes

1. André Blais and Elisabeth Gidengil, *Making Representative Democracy Work: The Views of Canadians*, Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Collected Research Studies, vol. 17, Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1991, p. 35.
2. Lorne Bozinoff, Peter MacIntosh and Niki Brodie, "MPs Viewed as Having Low Honesty and Ethical Standards", *Gallup Report*, August 3, 1992.
3. Lorne Bozinoff and André Turcotte, "Canadians are Losing Respect in Their Institutions", *Gallup Report*, February 1 1993. See also the study by Harold D. Clarke and Allan Kornberg, "Evaluations and Evolution: Public Attitudes Toward Canada's Federal Political Parties, 1965-1991", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol 26(2), 1993, pp. 287-311.
- 4 *Making Representative Democracy Work ...* p. 36
5. Louis Massicotte, "Parliament: The Show Goes On, But the Public Seems Bored", forthcoming in J. Bickerton et Alain G. Gagnon, *Canadian Politics* (2nd Edition), Peterborough: Broadview Press.
6. Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics. The Promise of Disharmony*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. Claude Jannoud of France has expressed a similar idea. See *Au rendez-vous du nihilisme*, Paris, Arléa, 1989.
7. Herbert McClosky and John Zeller, *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984; Blais and Gidengil, *Making Representative Democracy Work...*, p. 40.
8. Jean Charron, *La production de l'actualité politique, une analyse stratégique des relations entre la presse parlementaire et les autorités de tutelle*, Doctoral Thesis, Department of Political Science, Laval University, 1990.
9. Denis Monière, "Les journaux en campagne électorale: neutralité ou engagement?", Department of Political Science, University of Montreal, 1993.
10. Monière, "Les journaux en campagne électorale...", Denis Monière, "Les informations télévisées sont-elles biaisées?" Department of political science, University of Montreal, 1993.
11. André Blais and Stéphane Dion, "Trop d'Etat? Un baromètre de l'opinion", *Politique* vol. 11, 1987, pp. 45-72.