

Voters demand trust: Higher ethical standards needed to overcome alienation of citizens that threatens our democracy
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By Dr. Gordon Guyatt

“Why should I trust you?”

That was the question I heard most frequently as I went door-to-door as a candidate in the recent federal election. People expressed the question in a variety of ways, but the underlying message was clear, and providing an answer was not easy.

The public’s disappointment with politicians is profound, and almost universal. As a candidate involved in doorstep discussions, I was seeking a quick way to engage voters in the minute or two of discussion available to explain my party’s platform. “Canadians are fed up with broken promises,” proved to be a statement that elicited nods, or exclamations of agreement, from almost everyone.

Even more disturbing, many potential voters have passed beyond disappointment, and become deeply cynical. For these individuals, all politicians are the same. Since you can’t rely on any of them to keep their word, engaging in the political process is pointless. Gradually but persistently falling voter turnouts reflect the growing number of Canadians joining the ranks of the terminally cynical.

This ever-increasing alienation profoundly threatens the very core of Canadian society, democracy.

Who determines the directions our country takes? Those with power, and those with leadership positions, in both the private and public sector. Large corporations, often with multinational interests, and the senior executives who run these corporations, constitute one extremely powerful force in shaping Canadian society.

Big business leaders have a legitimate primary interest in their companies’ growth and profits. While many business leaders are community-minded, it is unreasonable to expect them to look after the interests of ordinary Canadians. Ensuring equitable access to high quality health care, education, childcare, and affordable housing is simply not their job. Nor

is protecting the environment for future generations.

For most of us, however, the quality of public health care, education and the environment is vital to our well-being. In tough times, access to income supports, social programs, and affordable housing is even more crucial.

If citizens cannot look to government to protect what they value, to whom can they look? If they feel disenfranchised at election time, how can they act to look after their common interests?

Alienation from the political process leaves Canadians helpless, and their deep anger at this helplessness is understandable – indeed, it is inevitable.

Are politicians the dishonest, unreliable, unscrupulous individuals that so many members of the public are seeing? Overwhelmingly, I think not.

Indeed, one finds evidence of frank dishonesty and violation of trust far more often in the business community than in politicians or government bureaucracies. One need only look to Enron and Nortel, and a host of other scandals, to realize how widespread unsavory practices are within big business.

In the area that I, as a health policy analyst, know best, the magnitude of fraud among for-profit companies is staggering. Columbia/HCA, the largest investor-owned for-profit hospital firm in the United States, has paid the US government US \$1.7 billion in settlements for overbilling of Medicare. Tenet, the second largest US for-profit hospital firm, paid more than half a billion dollars to settle charges of giving kickbacks for referrals and inappropriately detaining psychiatric patients. These are but the largest of dozens of such settlements, and even they represent only those firms that were caught.

Nevertheless, bemoaning the disproportionate attention the media gives to the occasional serious misconduct among politicians and bureaucrats does little good. As public representatives, Canadians expect politicians to achieve a far higher standard than the business community. The only solution to public cynicism is delivering that higher standard.

Fulfilling that objective will not be easy. It will mean resisting a host of temptations. As a candidate, I saw how much easier it is to get attention for attacks on opponents than for one's own positive policies. Yet, a "throw the blackguards out" strategy merely feeds public cynicism.

I saw how difficult it is to acknowledge all the problems that, because of financial or political obstacles, one will not be able to solve. Yet, yielding to the temptation to make promises one cannot keep has been disastrous in undermining the credibility of our political process.

I haven't been elected, but it isn't difficult for me to imagine the temptations to reward friends and supporters, a practice that in most areas of life is simply decent behavior. Yet, when dealing with public resources, such recognition represents a betrayal of trust.

When Paul Martin was elected, he acknowledged that his government must do much better. If Canadian politicians are to regain the public trust, all parties and political leaders must respond Martin's call for better performance and higher standards.