



Labels, perceptions & dangerous assumptions

Listening to the vitriol spewed during recent elections the terms right-wing, left-wing and centrist are bandied about with reckless abandon. At times I wonder if people have any idea of what they really mean. If they do not, effective policy, change and leadership may be lost because of a knee-jerk reaction to an erroneous label.

As a former student of international relations, with more than a decade of diplomatic experience, I believe the traditional far-left ideology is of a one-size fits all policy designed to give every human being the same deal. The ultra-right represents the *law of the jungle* where the fittest survive at the expense of the weakest.

History has shown that both extremes are dangerous because they are simplistic and require little thought. Any move to the centre by either the left or right involves complexity and so requires more thinking to decide on a course of action. In a parallel fashion, centrist policies demand ongoing buy-in from the electorate as situations and people evolve.

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* provides a dispassionate look at human nature as it sorts itself into survival groups when faced with a blank canvas or impending chaos. He illustrates clear options—rule by self-interest, pleasure and fear, or, more challengingly the pursuit of a framework that accommodates individual and collective identities and aspirations. It is not a stretch to say that human nature, in its desire for easy certainty, more easily opts for the former.

Insidiously, today the lines between the two approaches are blurred. So often tyrannical self-interest is disguised as policy for the collective good! For me the issue is further exacerbated by the global economy, mass marketing and world

media realities that have caused a very real shift in what is right or left wing. As a student decades ago, the glorification of individuals and their achievements was very much a right-wing phenomenon.

Today the opposite seems true.

McWorld-type global branding, mass production, outsourcing and mergers appear to negate attempts at individuality. People seem to choose what everyone else finds satisfactory. Little thinking is required. Is this perhaps not a root cause of our current economic collapse?

Similarly, since Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* brought environmentalism to the mainstream, tree-huggers, renewable energy pundits and the like are now seen as socially chic—no longer relegated to labels such as the *left*, the *great unwashed* and *naïve hippies/peace lovers*.

Is this perhaps due to the money to be made in moving to a greener world?

Complicated issues are difficult to discuss. Policies that require accommodation of opposing points of view are difficult to sell. I came across an interesting quote recently in Tim Franks' *Jerusalem Diary* (BBC) dated 17 November 2008: I was blown away by the simplicity of the message: "... As a clinical psychologist I have often come across this type of narrow, one-sided non-reflexive way of thinking. It is most often associated with pathology. It is often very difficult to make a change because of the resistance or (most often) inability to shift

perspective. Most often these people are unable to feel uncertain, the major incentive to investigate a matter further. Once I took a course in 'argumentation'. The rules are to take a topic, make two teams, flip a coin which side to argue and then go for 'winning'. Try it at home or with friends and you get the first-hand experience of being an extremist..."

—Mikael Scharin, Gothenburg, Sweden

Through decades of hard work, Canada has a history of finding the middle road domestically and internationally. We should do our utmost to see that we hand this legacy on to future generations.

Those of us responsible for informing the public should carefully consider whether or not we are complicit in encouraging audience complacency with the unthinking use of simplistic knee-jerk labels and clichés. Think, for example, how often we use the phrase "linked to Al Qaeda", without the least detail, as a blanket stamp of finality; of how we interpret an understanding of the Palestinian people as either "Pro-Palestinian" or "anti-Semitic" in nature. Are human-rights watchdogs merely "socialists"?

Thinking things through situation by situation, person by person, is what makes democracy work. Are we up for it?

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