

Speech by Martha Hall Findlay

MP for Willowdale

June 24, 2008

POLITICS of the POSSIBLE

I'm new to the House of Commons. And after a bit of a winding road, I am thrilled to finally be there. But I have to say, it's not a particularly pretty place.

Question Period is the theatre of Canadian politics. It sets the stage for the issues of the moment—this is what the media pick up on. And, there are cameras—so it's where all the grandstanding occurs. But I cringe every time I see a school group of grade 8 students up in the Gallery. The heckling, the lack of decorum or respect, the personal insults, the lack of answers to any questions, the attacking, the blaming—and worst, the lying—are all appalling. But it's theatre, 45 minutes of it.

What worries me more is that the tone and behavior of Question Period are characteristic of all of Canadian politics today. The mantra is always, don't answer questions, just blame and attack; prevent anyone from talking to anyone; keep the message simple—and scary. Scare Canadians about crime, about terrorism, about spending, about increasing taxes—even if there is no basis for the threat. From where I sit, it is mostly from the government side, but, unfortunately, there's enough negativity from all sides to go around. People who have been around a long time tell me that this is the worst it's ever been. Anyone reading the papers or watching the news—and the real keeners who watch CPAC—we can all see that politics in Ottawa has descended into a rather rank and decaying atmosphere of negativity and pessimism.

The PMO's attempt to control virtually everything gives it the unnerving appearance of a dictatorship wannabe. Free speech; an open media;

legitimate questions in the House of Commons; God forbid, true debate of the issues; the proper open conduct of Standing House Committees; having faith in the non-partisanship of the civil service; respect for the law and the courts; true accountability and transparency (not just saying the words and then doing the opposite)—all of these can be messy, can mean a longer road to results, can (and I would argue must) challenge assumptions; and they can sometimes make issues tough to manage. All true—but rightly so! These are the bulwarks, the bastions of a true democracy. But messiness doesn't suit the current government. Not a bit. The answer in today's Ottawa: control, control, bully, bully---and keep it simple.

Ironically, this extreme control from the PMO comes from the very people who criticized past PMOs the most for being too involved. But all that we have seen in the past pales in comparison with what we see now. It is indeed true that power corrupts. Witness:

- The extraordinary control of the media. On the one hand, through the blatant favouring of certain reporters through access; on the other, through the overall intimidation that occurred early in this government's term. My impression was that much of the media was impressed by Harper's demeanor, his "decisiveness", the reports that he was so "smart". But he was tough and mean with reporters; he treated them with complete disrespect, and they responded, much as kicked dogs do—by cowering, trying extra hard to please, and coming back for more.
- The attempts to control and intimidate civil servants. [list examples]
- The subversion of the process of Parliament—to the point of producing a confidential, detailed manual on all of the different dodgy and dishonest ways to disrupt, entangle and in many cases completely block the work of the Standing Committees of the House—the very places where most of the real work usually gets done.
- The shackling of Cabinet ministers, let alone MPs. They don't get to say, let alone decide, anything of any substance. Cabinet Ministers! How bad is it when the PMO even dictates which bars in town are "off limits" for MPs and staffers, and which cultural and social events are "allowed" and which are to be shunned. I expect Stephen Harper is now kicking himself for not also dictating who people can sleep with. I mean, are these people not grownups?

- The attempts to control, to neuter the Opposition through intimidation, utter disrespect, and with Liberal MPs and Stéphane Dion in particular, repeated, nasty, personal insults.
- The attempts to not only control but to form the opinion of the Canadian public. This is not new, all politicians have done this. But this government has reached a new low of fear-mongering and propaganda, using factually dishonest attack ads, blisteringly inappropriate 10 percenters, repeated personal attacks and scary slogans and sound bites. Sowing fear and pessimism in the minds of Canadians—in Canada!!! This country of such talent and promise. How tragic, how wrong. I hope to think that this behaviour says more about them than about the people they target, but I'm afraid that they work.
- But the worst for me is the ability to lie, apparently unencumbered by any compunction, qualm or guilt. I was shocked in my first few Question Periods to see Members of Parliament stand up, in that august chamber which holds so much history and democratic tradition—to see elected Members of the Canadian Parliament stand up and, knowingly, and blatantly, lie. Through their teeth. Some have said I'll get used to it, but I hope that I NEVER stop being shocked at such dishonesty from Members of Parliament. If we accept that behaviour, we diminish ourselves, and we risk replacing whatever respect there may still be for the office of MP, with distrust, cynicism or, perhaps even worse, ambivalence.

That has never been my approach to life

That will NOT be my approach to politics

Frankly, that's not why I came here, and it's just not my style. ***I have often said, Stephen Harper can try to control the government, but I'll be damned if he'll control the attitude.***

We must shift from the negative, to the positive; from the fearful to the confident.

Stephen Harper peut bien essayer to controller le gouvernement, mais jamais va t'il controller l'attitude.

I refuse to engage in the politics of fear. We've seen enough of that with George W Bush---remember the fear-mongering over the WMD that never existed. The fear-mongering that has allowed them to hypocritically hold people in jail, with no charge, no rights, no process—and indeed torture----the very things, in our democratic societies, where the rule of law is supposed to govern, that we are supposed to stand against.

We can see from the US primaries how the Americans have grown tired of it too.

So I repeat---I will not engage in the politics of fear, of negativity and pessimism. Mine are the politics of the possible.

Folks will ask, "Who is she, to be saying this? What does she know?" Well, I am someone who, at almost 50, has been around a few different blocks, with some terrific non-political experiences. Someone who has no financial or other need to be in politics, but who sees the enormous potential of this great country and its people, and who believes that to achieve that potential, we need to do politics differently.

Trust me, I know the difference optimism can make. I had to be optimistic to throw my hat into the ring for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada in 2006 (some used quite different adjectives to describe at the time, I can assure you!!) Legions of people thought I was crazy. And they were the charitable ones. So it's not like I haven't stared down naysayers before. But I knew then in my gut, as I know now, that stepping up to the task was right. And sure, I didn't win. (Came last, actually, but we don't really need to focus on that now.) But we did something big with that campaign. We contributed to the debate. We added to the spirit. And the fact that we set out across the country in that big red bus provided a dose of optimism sorely lacking in the political process. People were inspired by the optimism.

And this is a key discovery I made during the course of the 10-month leadership and the months following that across the country during our Outreach program. I have, over the course of about a year and half, criss-crossing the country (I

know lots of good trailer parks and campgrounds if anyone wants to know....)

People responded so positively because there is an attitudinal vacuum out there. It's not apathy—people are plenty interested in various things, but it sure isn't politics. It's a vacuum. People WANT to be interested, to feel engaged, to feel positive and hopeful about their country, their futures, and the futures for their children. They WANT to feel good about what their politicians are doing--- but we sure aren't giving them much to work with are we?

So what now? And let me stress, this is not “me”, but “you”—all of us together. This is how we can do politics differently. And make positive change:

- Look for the positive
- See where change is needed, and work for that change, inclusively
- Say “well done” when it's deserved; don't always attack. And be prepared to say, when required and with humility, “we messed up, but we learned how to do better”
- Work at finding common interests
- Respect the civil service, and let them do their jobs. They are terrifically talented people who, absent intimidation and control, do an excellent job of getting things done in a non-partisan way.
- Seek and respect the opinions of others. You may still disagree, but in listening, you find yourself having to re-persuade yourself of your position, that's healthy
- Remember the incredible potential that Canada and we Canadians have.

Yes, this country has work to do. It's already great, but it can, and should be, better. We in politics have lost much of the trust and confidence of the Canadian people. We need to re-build that confidence, to rejuvenate, to infuse the country and our communities with enthusiasm and a sense of engagement. But we won't accomplish that by attacking each other, by blaming, by refusing to cooperate in committees, by bullying and politicizing the civil service, by pulling away from environmental and international challenges, instead of seeing them as opportunities.

Don't get me wrong---we can and must acknowledge partisan differences---we believe our liberal values and principles to be the best ones for the country and all Canadians. I firmly believe that we offer the best, most positive, vision for Canada's future; the best policies and strategies---- and, if I do say so myself, one heck of a team of really talented, experienced, capable people.

It's time for energy, vision, creativity, passion---I ask you to go out and help spread this message---both the strengths of our liberal values and principles for this wonderful country, but our politics of the possible.