
Personal Conscience, Caucus Solidarity and Public Responsibility

by Mark Koenker, MLA

Legislators have to deal with conflicting pressures imposed by party solidarity, public responsibility and personal conscience. This article suggests that if parliamentarians want to do anything about rehabilitating public trust in parliamentary democracy they had better consider how to deal with these pressures.

The question of how a member deals with conflicting pressures is fundamental to the question of honest representation. If we are going to talk about honesty in representation, we also have to talk about issues of risk and trust. Honesty can be terribly risky in any human relationship, whether in business or personal affairs, and it is particularly true in our political relationships. Why else is there so much public cynicism about the political process if not for the fact that many people feel you simply cannot trust politicians to tell the truth. The media, of course, have their role in feeding this cynicism but I suggest that we as elected members have to acknowledge our role also.

Two years ago my provincial party held its annual convention in Saskatoon. Why would an elected member miss his party's convention, particularly if he did not have to leave home and family for yet another weekend out of town? I did. It because I was feeling increasingly uneasy about my government's decisions to proceed with casinos and gambling in Saskatchewan.

I had spoken against this both in Caucus and in my constituency before the decisions were made. I had voted against it in Caucus. Once the decision was finalized, I had, when appropriate to caucus discussion, expressed on-going reservations and pressed for clarity on particulars. But essentially, I had accepted it and did

not dissent publicly until some two years later, when, in the course of door to door canvassing and membership renewals the issue started to surface again. I felt compelled to admit I shared many of the reservations being raised with me.

The upshot of all this was that when it came time to attend the party's provincial convention I did not exactly have a song in my heart and decided not to attend as a way of stepping back for a reality check. It was a way of saying to others, that I wanted to register my reservations about gaming policy and how it was unfolding. I also had legitimate commitments that conflicted with the convention. My wife had a Friday evening banquet and wanted me to attend. Sunday morning I had responsibilities for leading a church service out of town. So, I did not go the convention. All went well, until about 10:00 Monday morning when the phone rang in my constituency office and I found myself talking to a local newspaper reporter who said: "I noticed you were the only MLA not at the convention this past weekend. I thought I would give you a call. Was there a reason you were not there?"

Instantly, panic set in! How honest could I be? Should I risk talking to him? If I did talk to him, could I trust him not to do me or the government in? How could I buy myself time to think what to do? "You devil!" I said. "You would have to notice that and ask me wouldn't you!" I talked about my scheduling conflicts and my ambivalence about the government's gaming agenda and in doing so pretty well guaranteed the article that appeared in Tuesday morning's paper. If looks could kill, on Wednesday morning in the halls of the Legislature I would have been dead.

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"To venture is to risk anxiety but not to venture is to lose oneself".

Soren Kierkegaard

It is precisely in risking honesty that I have found I have been able to sift or sort through responsibilities to caucus and see more clearly personal and public responsibilities. So I submit that to venture honesty as an elected member is to risk anxiety ... but not to do so, is to lose oneself. And not only oneself, but our role as parliamentarians as well.

How easy it is for us in the parliamentary system to conform to caucus or cabinet, to toe the party mark and spew the party line. Indeed, the very nature of caucus life seems to require conformity, if not inside caucus, then certainly outside. "Loose lips sinks ships" we are reminded in caucus when the going gets tough. The reality is that caucus life is predicated not only on confidentiality (that what is said in caucus stay in caucus, precisely because that is where differences of opinion get aired), but caucus solidarity as well. "Matters of conscience", of course, are excepted, but even here the expectation is that an individual fully consider the consequences of his or her actions for others in caucus, and then, in doing so, most often, do not speak out or act.

After all, it is hard enough in politics to defend against one's enemies without having to worry about someone from your own ranks putting you under fire, deliberately or not. Indeed, just as no team in the world of sports can possibly function if all individual are not team players, so life in caucus is predicated not simply on friendship, mutual respect or working relationships in the abstract or theoretical sense but fundamental, personal commitment to group solidarity and functioning as a team.

Would that many of the dilemmas elected members find in relation to caucus life were only issues of confidentiality, that on matters vital to the life of the government or so-call "state secrets", members keep quiet. What does one do, however, with issues that may not be vital to the life of the government but effect public perception or standings in the polls if someone takes it upon himself or herself to break caucus ranks?

In the opening of Hamlet, Polonius gives the following advice to his son Laertes: "To thine own self be true and if must follow as the night the day, thou cannot then be false to any man." Can we who are elected and charged

with public trust for the functioning of the democratic parliamentary tradition of government in our country say this is part of our credo? To do so, we walk a fine and delicate balance.

I conclude by venturing two points for consideration in measuring one's response to personal conscience and social responsibility in relation to caucus solidarity.

First, I suggest there is a sense in which one needs to earn the right of dissent from caucus. Like it or not, caucus solidarity remains an important feature of our Canadian parliamentary system as it functions today and needs to be respected. Rather than suggest the right to dissent is or ought to be a given in relation to caucus life, I think the opposite is actually true. Consent is the given in the functioning of the caucus system, practically and theoretically. I do not believe any of us, simply because we do not like something our colleagues have decided or are doing, automatically are entitled to do or say our own thing. We owe our colleagues more than that. We need to carry in good faith the burden of a collective decision-making process and shoulder our share of responsibility for the results. Only when we have actively engaged ourselves in these tasks, in the larger life of caucus, and over period of time, can we even begin to weigh at all realistically whether we have earned the right of dissent and presume to break ranks.

This leads me to the second point. Individually, we as elected members also need to question caucus solidarity and more studiously test some of the convenient conventions and mythologies that so often tend to govern caucus life. Rather than suggest that consent is a given in relation to the functioning of caucus, we need to ask more often first whether or not our personal conscience is being engaged or compromised and secondly whether our larger public responsibilities are being discharged or sacrificed on the altar of caucus solidarity.

If these two points sound contradictory and leave us on the horns of a dilemma, then so be it. That is probably where we as elected members need to be more often than we would like. When all is said and done, what we owe our constituents who elected us and the public at large is nothing more or less than good government. You do not get good government if you do not have people in government making good decisions both collectively with their peers and individually in dialogue with their own deepest perspectives and personal convictions or conscience.