

Jerks on all sides



In the last issue of *Policy Options*, my fellow columnist Joseph Heath wrote an (as always) interesting piece advising Canada's political parties to beware their members whose "political affiliations are grounded more in visceral reactions than in reasoned choices." Reason over passion. Trudeau's motto. You'd expect nothing less from a philosopher.

The observation was prompted by a comment Heath once heard — we have all heard it at one time or another — that though the Left may screw up on occasion in the end they deserve our sympathy because their hearts are in the right place. Essentially the same argument was used last century to excuse the murderous depravities of Soviet and Chinese communism or at least distinguish them from Nazi depravities — on the grounds that Stalin and Mao did their mega-murder in the name of that noble ideal, the equality of man.

Joe Heath has less harmful people in mind: the "bleeding-hearts" who provide the NDP with so much of its man- and woman-power and who "have never met a claim to victimhood that does not cry out for redress and compensation." These "social workers" struggle constantly with "socialists" for control of the NDP. The social workers ran the party — ran it into the ground — in the 1990s, but Jack Layton's victory represents the return of the socialists and, presumably, bluer skies ahead.

Now, given a choice between bleeding-hearts whose fault is compulsive compassion and more reasoned folk who have somehow persuaded themselves that socialism — they're "socialists," not social democrats — is still a useful political philosophy in the 21st century, I'll take the bleeding hearts. Capitalism does produce personal tragedies. So does life in general. When people are suffering other people's desire to help is hard to fault. By contrast,

believing there are serious alternatives to market economies is mainly delusional.

But Heath's most pointed advice is for the Right, not the Left. If the Left must cull its bleeding-hearts, the Right needs to expel its "jerks" — its uncaring, mean-spirited, unreasoning jerks.

Hold that thought a moment. Note that Heath offers no self-purging advice to the Centre, that biggest of Canadian political tents. Is everyone in the Centre there "for principled reasons"? Have they all "thought through the issues, [do they] have a general view of how the economy and the political system function, [and do they] adhere to some relatively clearly articulated moral principles"?

Mightn't some people be Centrists for less admirable reasons? They like being on the winning team. They have a golf course they want to finance. Or maybe they just find deciding so darn hard.

But back to the Right. Heath says there are "all sorts of fancy intellectual reasons why one might want to shrink government, reduce taxes, and curtail entitlement problems" — though use of the dismissive "fancy" suggests maybe he doesn't really believe that. Never mind. The problem with the Right is its mean streak: "A lot of people support these policies simply because they don't care about anybody but themselves. They are, in other words, self-interested jerks."

A little further along, we read that Mike Harris and Ralph Klein are, on the right-wing spectrum, "quite a ways out toward the jerk end." Klein one night went to pick a fight at a homeless shelter — though he did so in his cups and shortly afterward swore off drink for good. (For comparative purposes, it would be instructive to get Jack Layton or Sheila Copps in their cups and see what prejudices spewed forth.) For his

part, Mike Harris once cut a nutrition supplement for pregnant welfare mothers, saying it was to make sure they didn't spend the cash on beer (though in the very same breath he also said "if there are requirements for the health of the mother, they'll get it from us").

Heath argues that the Right hasn't done as well in Canada as in the US because "the tolerance for jerks is so much higher south of the border." But wait a second. Both Mike Harris and Ralph Klein were/are very successful Canadian politicians. Both won majority governments after making the statements quoted. And Harris did it in sophisticated Ontario, so this isn't just a problem of Albertans being mean red-necks (except the Liberal ones, of course). There may be lots of us jerks out there.

I suspect a major reason is that many of us are fed up — both viscerally and intellectually — surrendering half our income to taxes and then being told we mustn't question whether the people who get this money either really need it or make good use of it or for that matter are actually the people it's supposed to be going to. (We are very progressive in Quebec and yet year after year see the same people begging in the Metro. Where does all the money go?)

Nor does it help when any suggestion that we might (please, sir) spend less than half our income on taxes is taken as evidence we "don't care about anybody" but ourselves.

The norms of civility Heath would encourage — we all would encourage — should allow for straight, intellectually honest talk about what makes otherwise reasonable people mad as hell.

William Watson appears monthly. The former editor of Policy Options, he teaches economics at McGill University. william.watson@mcgill.ca