Of prime ministers, presidents and professors

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We had a very nice election yesterday. After 10 years in the wilderness, the Liberal party, the centrist voice that has dominated Canada's politics for most of the 150 years we have existed as a country, was returned to power, crushing the governing Conservative Party. In doing so, they established a number of historical precedents, going from 3rd place, 34 seats and 20 % of the popular vote in 2011 to first place, 184 seats and 40 %. The campaign also set records—the longest in Canadian history at 78 days and far and away the nastiest, with attack ads morning, noon and night (as an aside, Canada, like the UK has a “first past the post” system where each party has candidates in each riding and the party that elects the most candidates becomes the government, with its head the prime minister).

But statistics don't tell the whole tale. In fact, while the many polls were partly right—they estimated the percent of the popular vote within a percent or two, they were wildly off the mark in terms of the number of seats. Even in the first hour after the polls closed, the pundits were viewing a possible majority Liberal government as a long shot—yet an hour or two later it was a *fait accompli*.

What went right or wrong, and what does this have to do with education anyway.? It wasn't an issue of policy. The policies of all three major parties were almost indistinguishable. In fact the extreme left wing and the governing right wing parties had almost identical economic platforms. It wasn't handouts—all parties said they would reduce taxes, increase pensions and child care allowances and also balance budgets (which can only happen by printing more money). But it seems to me that the profound difference was one of leadership. The winner, 43 year old Justin Trudeau, despite his youth, had a vision and a dream of the future—a dream that was inclusive and optimistic. This contrasted directly with the divisive campaign run by the Conservatives. In Trudeau's words: “We beat fear with hope.... We beat cynicism with hard work.”

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This is a leadership formula that has been adopted by many of the greatest politicians, most recently by Obama. Politicians who forget that they are there at the behest of the electorate, and can be removed from power as quickly as they assumed power, ultimately fail.

In that respect, governments are very different organizational structures than businesses. While it may be the case that president of General Widgit needs to show some leadership, his skill is judged more by the balance sheet and the smiles on the stockholders' faces than by the happiness of the workers. Henry Ford may well epitomize the characteristics of the business winners—hard working, single-minded, creative—but certainly not caring.

Universities have many things in common with governments, particularly when it comes to education, as I learned in a course on organizations when I took a Master's at Michigan State in the late 1970's. Universities have their own organizational structure—"collegial networks"—distinctive from the bureaucratic silos of the civil service and the inverted tree structure of big business. The nature of the collegial network is such that it cannot be reduced to an organizational chart with each faculty member nicely dropped into a single box. Instead, a faculty member has multiple roles—educational, administrative, research and in health sciences, clinical. No faculty member has a "boss." She may instead have multiple bosses—the head of the clinical teaching unit, the chair of the curriculum committee, the course organizer, the principal investigator of the research study (although of course, she may be a coordinator of some courses and a principal investigator on some studies).

That means that no one has absolute call on your time and energy. You may belong to a department (or 2 or 3 or 4) and there may be expectations of you in terms of contribution to the department. But typically these are framed in general terms—how many teaching hours, how many committees. No one can tell you what to teach or what to research as long as you teach enough hours and publish enough papers. Ultimately you are not accountable to any one person; you will be judged (infrequently) by the promotion and tenure committee—truly a judgment by peers. You may not even know many of the members who will sit in judgment of your progress. And of course the endpoint of this process, at least in some places, remains tenure, which once granted ensures that you will no longer be subject to summative judgment except in the most egregious circumstances.

What that means for education is that educational leaders have virtually no power to tell an individual faculty member what she is required to teach or how she should teach it. Instead, you must govern by moral suasion. One faculty member learned this hard lesson to her considerable discomfort. She decided that it was time for a fresh look at the undergraduate program, and as a first step, each committee member was required to apply for her current job. What she forgot was that this, like almost all roles in education, was voluntary, and of the 12 committee members only 5 reapplied. And there were no other applicants. So unlike the army, where the drill sergeant can teach you, with a very loud voice, how to march, run and shoot, in the university, we will have little success in giving orders. We cannot tell people how to teach unless they ask for help. In that respect, universities are like the Boy Scouts, where we have to use all our diplomatic skills to get people to sign up for various roles and then we have to deal with whatever we've got. Few educational leaders have the luxury of picking and choosing from an excess of volunteers.

The same chaos applies to what is to be taught. As an example, many years ago I inherited an undergraduate course in psychometrics in the psychology department. Even though my course name, number and description were the same as the previous instructor's course, I realized that there was almost no overlap in course content so graduates of my course would get about 5 % on his final exam and vice versa. Strangely no one cared, as

long as the slot in the undergraduate calendar was filled. And when you think about it, maybe that's simply a harbinger of things to come. After all, come graduation time, the students, all of whom can now claim the title of psychology graduate, may have little in common except a couple of introductory courses. Some will be applied neuroscientists, some cognitive psychologists, or developmental, or industrial, or personality, or psychometricians.... And if they go on to graduate work, by the time they have a PhD, each will have almost nothing in common with the other. And as pointed out by Cronbach (1957) many years ago, these differ not in degree but in kind—it is literally the case that one person's signal is the other's noise.

In one very important respect, health professions—indeed all professions—are not like that. Which brings me to Part Two of the Michigan State Course—"professions". If we reflect on the last paragraph, there is one exception to this diversity rule. Those who go into clinical psychology, will, at some point, have to pass a licensing examination. And all of them, whether their interest is kids or seniors, organic dementias or personality disorders, will have to pass the same examination.

So why the difference? Because, while the rest will spend their lives creating grant proposals, papers and presentations and being judged by their peers, unlike all the other psychologists, they have clients, to which they are responsible. And unlike plumbers, lawncutters and taxicab drivers, they have a specialized body of knowledge that can only be judged by another professional. These two features—client relationships and specialized (and standardized) body of knowledge are the two essential elements of a profession. Everything else—professional bodies, accreditation, licensure examinations, regulatory bodies, follow from that.

And this also dictates profound differences in educational approach. Unlike my psychometrics course, there is a defined (more or less) body of knowledge that all graduates must acquire. That is assured by accreditation (LCME in North America) and licensure (USMLE in the United States). And it further implies central planning of the curriculum committees, so that we can be assured that all our students learn the way the kidney works and the 29 causes of anemia. The ensuing tension between the goal of the curriculum committee to ensure that all the relevant bits are "covered" and the goal of the individual instructor to stay close to her own topic area to ensure that she is relevant and inspiring (and also to minimize preparation), is the constant concern of the curriculum planners.

We all decry the politics that pervades university campuses. Perhaps this essay goes some in explaining why the politics exists, and how political and diplomatic skills may in fact be an essential skill in mounting an educational program.

References

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