

Elect your local hypocrite

By DOUG SAUNDERS

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This being a political season, I ought to use a few words in defence of hypocrisy.

I know that a lot of you think you are going to cast your vote for a straight arrow, a leader who never breaks promises, a leader who is appealing at election time, but it is a



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A little bit of hypocrisy makes for good politics. If you examine history's most successful politicians, you will not find the leaders who invariably kept their word and stuck close to their goals. Quite the contrary: Take a turn through the biography shelf, and you will find creative, flexible people who reacted to their environment in novel, successful and varying ways, throwing consistency to the wind. During their time in office, they were often called hypocrites and turncoats.

That, not rigid consistency, is the mark of higher intelligence and great leadership. Search for the promise keepers and straight arrows, and you'll find both history's worst monsters and (more relevant to Canadians) its greatest mediocrities.

You don't have to trust history on this one any more: Hypocrisy now has the backing of science. Keith Stanovich, a cognitive scientist at the University of Toronto, has built a strong scientific case in defence of hypocrisy.

Mr. Stanovich, in his fascinating book *The Robot's Rebellion*, defines hypocrisy as the collision of first-order and second-order thought. First-order thought consists of the basic, animal desires promoted by our genes -- reproduction, self-preservation, mate-finding, nest-building, self-aggrandizement and personal defence.

People whose thoughts are mostly first-order are known as wantons: Their personal desires and aspirations are their only goals, and their principles consist of remaking the world to suit those goals. People who vote for right-wing parties entirely because they want to pay less tax are wantons. So are people who vote for left-wing parties just because they want their organizations to get more grants.

Second-order thought looks beyond personal needs into rational calculations of larger principles and goals: If I give up this desire right now, it says, we all could be better off. It is higher, more principled intelligence. It constantly battles with our first-order desires, tending to require an even higher order of thought to reconcile those collisions. In Mr. Stanovich's system, the people who engage in this kind of thinking are known as strong evaluators.

Hypocrisy is a product of strong evaluation. "You can recognize a strong evaluator as someone who seems to be constantly wrestling with the conflict between first-order and second-order thought," Mr. Stanovich told me.

To wantons, strong evaluators look not only hypocritical but irrational. This makes sense: Consistent rationality is the hallmark not of great thinkers, but of low-order thinkers: "Rats and pigeons and chimps are probably more rational," Mr. Stanovich writes, than more principled, more civilized humans, who can stand above mere rationality in defence of higher principles.

This applies not just to leaders but to voters. In my riding, where there's a close NDP-Liberal race, the wantons on the left will cast their ballot for the New Democrats: Their only goal is the personal status of party identification. The higher-order thinkers will vote Liberal to stave off a Conservative government, sacrificing immediate gratification for higher goals and long-term principles.

To understand this fully, watch this weekend's Ronald Reagan memorials. When I think of him, the words that come to mind are those of his best biographer, Lou Cannon: "What made Reagan different was the power of his ideas and his stubborn adherence to them."

That stubbornness did the world little good. At a moment when the world was changing in dramatic ways, Mr. Reagan stuck firmly to a script that had been written in the late 1950s. It sounded good, since it addressed the basic animal desires of pocketbook and physical security, but it became dangerously unmoored from practical reality.

Conservatives like to say Mr. Reagan ended the Cold War, because the Cold War drew toward an end while he was president. Actually, because he refused to see the Soviet Union as anything other than a changeless "evil empire," and because he was so singularly devoted to nuclear expansion, he ignored vast opportunities for change. He almost certainly made the Cold War last two or three years longer than it would have under a more flexible, thinking leader.

The closer you examine the period's history, the more this becomes apparent. American historian Frances FitzGerald, whose *Way Out*

There in the Blue is the most detailed and impartial chronicle of the Washington 1980s yet written, points out the central paradox of the claim that Reagan ended the Cold War: "[S]ince it is the inveterate propensity of Americans to relate the fall of sparrows in distant lands to some fault or virtue of American policy, it went against the grain . . . to propose that the enormous military buildup of the Reagan years had no role at all in the demise of the Soviet Union."

A myth was created to link Mr. Reagan's tragic inflexibility to the heroic flexibility of Mikhail Gorbachev, in which "SDI [Star Wars] and the U.S. military buildup forced the Soviets to spend more than they could afford on their defences and/or convinced them of the inherent weaknesses of their system."

Summarizing her book's detailed research, she writes, "The evidence for this proposition is wanting." What actually did happen in the 1980s was that "the Soviet economy continued to deteriorate as it had during the 1970s. The economic decline, of course, resulted from the failures of the system created by Lenin and Stalin -- not from any effort on the part of the Reagan administration."

Ronald Reagan's first-order thinking, increasingly simplified by his senescence, created the illusion of high principle because it was so rigid and so simple.

In fact, it was wanton self-interest. A hypocrite, a high-minded promise-breaker, would have made a much better leader. They always do.

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