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Blurring public and private words

By Jim Taylor

Give the poor guy a break.

In a casual conversation during the royal visit to Halifax, Prince Charles expressed a critical view of Russian president Vladimir Putin.

Prince Charles was doing what royalty are supposed to do – shake hands, feign interest while smiling incessantly, and move on. Such conversations rarely consist of more than a few words.

But in this instance, Charles's chat with museum volunteer Marienne Ferguson lasted long enough for him to hear how she had come to Halifax. She was 13 when her Jewish pled fled from Gdansk just before the German army invaded Poland and launched World War II.

And Charles apparently said, "And now Putin is doing just about the same as Hitler."

I wouldn't have construed that as a political statement. More like an acknowledgement of current news.

It's no secret that Russia has manoeuvred several Russian-speaking territories into seceding and effectively joining Russia. Crimea is but the most recent example. Admittedly, Putin has not formally invaded any of those regions, as Hitler did in Czechoslovakia, Austria, Poland, and the Baltic nations. But the pattern seems disturbingly similar.

And it has been noted by many more people than Prince Charles. The same comparison has been made by former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble, Zbigniew Brzezinski, John McCain, and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Say nothing intelligent

But apparently the royal family is not supposed to say anything more controversial than, "Nice day, isn't it?"

"In constitutional monarchy," tweeted British Labour party MP Mike Gapes, "policy and diplomacy should be conducted by parliament and government. Monarchy should be seen and not heard."

Isn't that what we used to say about small children?

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg defended Charles's right to speak. "I have never been of this view that if you are a member of the royal family somehow you have to enter into some Trappist vow of silence," said Clegg. "Prince Charles is able, I would have thought, to be free to express himself. I don't know exactly what he did or didn't say in that conversation because he thought it was a private conversation."

Precisely. Casual conversations should not be treated as official statements.

British royalty have not always contented themselves with discreet silence. But that's the standard set by Queen Elizabeth. She has trained herself never to make spontaneous comments with political implications. She restricts any comments on current affairs to her heavily vetted annual Christmas messages.

Off the leash

Charles, however, like his grandfather, Lord Louis Mountbatten, likes to speak his mind. Over his lifetime as king in waiting, Charles has frequently ruffled feathers with his views on education, architecture, and the environment.

In February this year, he criticized inaction over flooding in Somerset. In 2010, he told the prime minister of Qatar – the main backer for a multi-million-pound development proposal in London – that his “heart sank” when he saw the designs. In 2004 and 2005, he wrote letters -- now tangled in a legal battle over whether their contents should be made public -- to a number of government departments.

The press savaged Charles during his divorce from Diana. But not long before, some British commentators argued that Charles was too valuable an asset to be stifled by coronation.

Not that coronation seems imminent. Mummy shows no signs of preparing to step down. At least, not until she has surpassed Queen Victoria’s record reign of 63 years and seven months. More likely, until she leaves Buckingham Palace feet first.

Context matters

Royal responsibilities aside, the reaction to Prince Charles’s comment reminds me again that we need to make a distinction between private communications and public pronouncements. The significance of any communication depends on context -- both who said it, and who they said it to.

In 1998, for example, CBC reporter Terry Milewski sought information from a protester during the APEC summit meetings in Vancouver. For referring to “the evil empire,” Milewski was disciplined. Does anyone seriously think his informant would have cooperated if Milewski had described the prime minister and police as “the legitimate authorities”? Or “the good guys”?

That’s not an excuse for bigotry or prejudice. When supposedly private comments contradict someone’s public persona, that person should be held accountable.

Otherwise, casual comments deserve to be treated as casual comments, not scrutinized as policy pronouncements.

The anonymous Russian diplomat who said, of Prince Charles’s aside, “We hope there is nothing behind it. But it is unclear to us: what does it mean? He is the future king, after all,” missed the point on two counts.

First, he failed to recognize that British monarchs, unlike Russian presidents, do not determine national policies.

Second, he failed to distinguish between a casual pleasantry and a formal expression of public policy.

We should all know better.

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YOUR TURN

James Russell had mixed feelings “over the loss of trust in public institutions. Some of it deserved to be lost when it was betrayed by greedy corporations, entitled churches, ignorant and racist or sexist officials and household tyrants. But we really do need to trust in at least some public institutions, at least most of the time. We need institutions we can trust because we can’t each do, or even supervise at every step, what needs to be done to get most of what we depend on, daily: safe food and water, informed children, working electricity, protection from organized enemies ...

“I’m convinced that systematic attempts to undermine public trust in institutions per se harm cause us far more harm than almost any single case of greed or selfishness for immediate benefit could do. The biggest systematic way to undermine trust is to refuse to face challenges directly and on their merits and instead to lie about and cast abuse at challengers. And that’s the path our current federal government is taking. It’s been well travelled in the past. We know where it leads. We need to get off it.”

Charles Hill offered an example illustrating the loss of trust: “Here in Texas the Attorney General who is running for re-election has just pled guilty to not divulging income for taxation. Within the last week, a number of law-enforcement individuals whose job it is to guard our border with Mexico and keep out illegals have been charged with facilitation of importing sex trade slaves and assorted illegal drugs. This is the state that takes pride in jailing people for possessing a few ounces of pot.

“While I am on the subject of the law....when I worked with sex offenders inside a prison, I learned that only 15% of those with whom I worked had a privately hired attorney. The others had a court appointed attorney. They were poor. Equal justice for all?

“However, I have personally known two city policemen who gave their lives enforcing and protecting. We should remember that the vast majority of the ‘foot-soldiers’ are honorable. Is corruption related to power?”

Rob Brown offered his own explanation: “Once upon a time, systems were closed. You didn’t find things out. So we trusted ‘officials.

“Then, the era of civil rights arrived. We usually think of black-white issues from the American south. I would argue it was much more than that, and that the war in Viet Nam was one of the additional problems. Again and again we have heard the call for more accountability from ‘officials.’ And the more we learn, the worse things appear. Credibility is strained.

“I don’t know where this will end. But I see that people are demanding integrity of ‘officials’; if they ‘talk the talk’ they need to ‘walk the walk.’ And many ‘officials,’ who grew up in closed systems, still want to keep the systems closed. Sadly. As long as that happens, there will be a lot of strain on our systems.”

Rob cited a California case parallel to the one involving the Vancouver police: “A young man there was a patient of University psychiatrists. The patient confided in one of the psychiatrists that he intended to kill his ex-girlfriend. He did it two months later. But the young woman was never informed; the man was not committed to hospital for psychiatric observation. The girl’s parents sued the University and a number of its staff, and won, for a variety of reasons, including the failure to warn, which was considered more important than patient confidentiality. (*Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California*, California Supreme Court.)”

John Clinton had his own suspicion of “officials”: “It’s not enough that folks don’t trust many institutions (especially government). But on top of that, the institution/government keeps coming back & saying: ‘I’m from the government. We’re here to help you.’

“I keep looking for a leader who can move us out of this quagmire. Over recent years, I thought we had found such a leader in the US -- but for a number of reasons neither one of them has been the successful savior. Are we getting our leaders from the wrong places in our nations? Should we look outside the regular political channels for folks with the ability to be credible and inspire & lead?”

Isabel Gibson asked, “What will be the outcome of distrusting those in authority? Having to think for ourselves?

“Truly, I don’t suppose we can blindly trust what anyone says, can we, whether they’re in a position of power or privilege or not?”

In further correspondence, Isabel added, “You’re right to distinguish distrust from skepticism. The latter is healthy -- the former is poisonous.”

Isabel doesn’t fully share my distrust of corporations: “I’ve never seen active lying (as distinguished from self-serving marketing) or evil-doing -- maybe I didn’t have access to the right (wrong?) levels. Certainly never saw any evidence of the collusion or conspiracy so loved by Hollywood. I have seen lots of sloppiness and lack of caring -- but no active evil.”

Steve Roney felt that suspicion of institutions went back far before Rachel Carson: “The attack on corporate morality, after all, is much older: the Muckrakers at the turn of the 20th century, Marx and Engels long before that.

What happened in the '60s was a loss of respect for government and the professions as well -- that seems to have been new.

"To my mind -- and maybe again, this is just my personal experience -- it had to do with

1. Nuclear weaponry and 'mutual assured destruction.'
2. The ambiguous wars: Korea, Vietnam; without any clear win, clear objective, or clear end. It naturally felt to the young that they were being sent off to be killed for nothing. Did governments really have our interests at heart?
3. The then-dominant psychological doctrine of behaviourism, which seemed clearly to answer the question above in the negative: governments, scientists, and those in authority saw us not as human but as cattle.

"Orwell, Huxley, and Salinger saw this early, and wrote about it; and their books struck a chord.

I also got a couple of letters that I won't bother printing. Except for one sample paragraph: "Islamists are supported in this war by big 'L' Leftists -- those unelectable antisemitic Marxists propagandizing the good-hearted left-of-centre with their Western-delegitimization strategies polished up in dank United Church basements. Islamists and Leftists reject Universal Human Rights and world-wide Women's Rights as 'Western fantasies.' Note how this reflects Putinism, indicating that Russia still directs the post-communist Leftist."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
