

Sunday May 18, 2014

The decline and fall of credibility

By Jim Taylor

The credibility of police forces dropped another notch last week.

In case you hadn't caught the story, a Vancouver constable received a tip (in November 2005) that an estranged boyfriend planned to murder his girlfriend. The constable took the tip to his supervisor, as he should have. The two decided to investigate the tip further, before notifying the potential victim. Tips are notoriously unreliable.

Three days later, the victim was dead. Stabbed 40 times. With her throat slit, for insurance.

The killer was convicted. But the victim's mother filed a complaint, alleging that the officers should have warned her daughter about the possible threat to her life.

The Vancouver police department took four years to dismiss the complaint. Two months after that, the police complaints commissioner ordered the investigation re-opened. The officers challenged the order on a technicality -- the order fell outside the 30-day deadline prescribed by the Police Act.

Another five years later, the province's Appeal Court agreed with them.

Nine years of delays and obfuscations. And we still don't know -- and now, we will never know -- if the police acted in the best public interest.

Tumbling confidence figures

Once upon a time, the credibility of the police was unquestioned. But then, so was the medical profession's. Doctors -- like fathers -- knew best. So did business and industry leaders. Clergy. Politicians. Judges.

Now they are all considered suspect. Because everyone has a bias, don't they?

In his 1989 bestseller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey suggested that a universal breakdown of credibility began in the late 1960s.

It was, commentators Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider agreed, "a high-water mark in the history of the American public's attitudes towards their key social, political, and economic structures."

Then came "the explosion of protest." Against the Vietnam War in particular. But also over "the status of women and various minority groups -- blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians."

According to Gallup polls, the credibility of all American institutions has fallen by roughly half since 1973. Public schools, from 54 to 29 per cent. Banks, from 60 to 23 per cent. News media, from 51 to 25 per cent.

Only the military showed an increase in public credibility, rising from 58 to 75 per cent.

I doubt if the military gets comparable credibility in Canada. But I'm sure that Canadian institutions have experienced comparable declines, even if the percentages differ. In the U.S., for instance, confidence in Congress fell from 42 to 13 per cent. Over the same period, according to Canadian sources, confidence in parliament fell from 70 to 37 per cent.

"The death of trust"

You can quibble with the figures; you can't dispute the decline. An EKOS poll this January called it "the death of trust."

The Conference Board of Canada, seeking causes, noted that the distrust focused mainly on hierarchical institutions and authority figures -- in families, at work, and in politics.

For me, it began with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Until then, I had docilely accepted corporate assurances that their products were safe, benign, and beneficial.

My skepticism grew over tobacco smoking. Lung cancer turned out not to be glamorous after all. Study after study showed that smoking led to cancer, heart disease, strokes, high blood pressure, diabetes, even infertility. Meanwhile, the tobacco industry issued strident denials.

Perhaps the juggernaut of decline is unstoppable. Stephen Harper's Conservative party promised to restore integrity to government. But every action, instead of reversing the plunge, seems to accelerate it. From firing independent voices to stonewalling on Senate scandals, each incident further weakens government credibility.

Harper seems intent on damaging existing authorities. Abandoning the mandatory long-form has made Statistics Canada's census data -- in the words of University of Toronto professor David Hulchanski -- "pretty much garbage." StatsCan's income figures, for example, no longer correspond with data from tax filings.

Warped logic

Most recently, Harper has attacked the Supreme Court of Canada, one of the few institutions that still retains much credibility.

An open letter signed by more than 600 lawyers and law teachers charged Harper with "impugning the integrity of the judiciary, through public and personal criticism of the Chief Justice."

A second letter asked the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva to investigate the criticisms levelled at Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin.

Yet he himself acts like an authority. Perhaps he believes that there can be only one authority. As prime minister, he is the country's highest authority. Therefore he must be believed.

There is a kind of warped logic to this reasoning. It's the same circular logic that evangelical Christians (still the core of the Conservative party) apply to the Bible: The Bible can be trusted. Because it's God's word. How do we know that? Because the Bible itself says it is.

Unfortunately, "just trust us" doesn't work anymore. Not for governments. Not for businesses. Not for police forces.

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YOUR TURN

While not disagreeing with the gist of last week's column, denouncing child sex trafficking, Deirdre Straughan did challenge my research: "Do you have a reliable source on the idea that sex trafficking or even prostitution increases around major sporting events? I've been reading elsewhere that this is a statistic made up by anti-prostitution activists, and there may in fact be no evidence behind it.

"It's possible that a single, biased source was originally responsible for the idea (maybe not even research) that sex work and trafficking increase around major sporting events. I'm particularly skeptical because I have now seen the 'massive influx of prostitutes expected!' headlines for World Cup soccer, the Olympics, and the Super Bowl. Yet I haven't seen any follow-up news reports actually proving that it happened."

The New York Times, Deirdre noted, expressed similar skepticism:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/01/opinion/the-super-bowl-of-sex-trafficking.html>

Bob Mason thought the issue required more than just outrage: "Like most people around the world, I am disgusted that anyone would suggest that what Abubakar Shekau says is in accordance with the Quran.

"Almost as disgusting is the delay in decrying this atrocity by so many of the world's leaders. It took four weeks before Michelle Obama made her statement of support for the parents whose daughters are missing. Our own Government is, apparently, to hold an emergency debate on this matter -- and what is more talk likely to achieve?

"Unless this debate in Ottawa leads to our U.N. Ambassador being instructed to table a motion calling on all member nations to abolish child marriages, and this gets overwhelming support from the U.N., talk is cheap. Civilized nations must lead the way in having these practices abolished, and all nations must increase vigilance to protect children from predators, and increase penalties for adults who take advantage of vulnerable children."

The rest of last week's letters were a follow-up to the previous week's letters.

Isabel Gibson wrote, "To pick up on the discussion in the comments, I have read that, over time, we align our thoughts with our behaviour (a consequence of what psychologists call 'cognitive dissonance' -- the disquiet that arises when these two are not aligned). For this reason, I agree with what you said about disciplining our speech to discipline our thoughts.

"But I also agree with what Steve Roney said, that folks have the right to voice unpopular, even disgusting, opinions. I think we've gone too far down the path of attempting to shut down discourse on difficult topics. Witness Justin Trudeau's recent decision to require all Liberal candidates to vote pro-choice (how much better that sounds than pro-abortion, eh?). That many (ahem) consider this a thorny problem requiring a nuanced approach requiring, in turn, mature, non-confrontational discussion in a pluralistic society, seems not to matter. Nope -- the morality is settled. Well, not for me it's not, and I don't even count myself as a pro-lifer."

I had responded to Steve Roney's comments, "As we guard our speech, so do we also discipline our thoughts."

To which Steve replied, "And that is exactly why I think it is so wrong to violate freedom of speech: because it ultimately violates freedom of thought."

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

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 "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isabel 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.
