

Emulating Obama? Should the Prime Minister Visit the Liberal Caucus?

I have just returned from a brief holiday in the United States and, when time passed slowly, I watched television. To do so is to conclude that many of our American neighbours are on the verge of national insanity. Reality shows follow reality shows, each more unreal than the last, while commercials pile upon commercials without end. And then there is Fox News, as “fair and balanced” as ever. To see the globe and the U.S. through Glenn Beck’s and Bill O’Reilly’s eyes is to live in a parallel world that seems almost as surreal as the most asinine of reality shows. There President Obama is almost always presented as a raving socialist ideologue, and his attempts to improve medical care for his people are only an effort to establish cost-controlling death panels to purge the elderly, much like in Britain. Or so a 93-year-old former Surgeon-General appeared to say in a paid advertisement that was almost omnipresent.

At the same time, of course, there are rational voices aplenty on television, not least that of President Obama. I watched his State of the Union address (and the instant analysis on at least five channels by cadres of commentators with the most extraordinary interpretations of what had just been said). The address struck me as genuinely fair and balanced, beautifully presented and, while not without partisanship, sensible in its analysis of the problems facing the United States. If only a Canadian leader could speak so well.

Even more impressive still was President Obama’s talk to, and conversation with, the Republican caucus of the House of Representatives in Baltimore. To watch the President go onto unfriendly turf and go a long way to disarming his opponents was almost magical. No one watching could doubt that this was an extraordinary moment. The President’s easy skill, humour, and grace as he responded to questions with facts and figures was stunning, and only the hardest hearts among the Congressmen and Congresswomen could have been unmoved. Unfortunately, there were many such hard-hearted Republican Representatives present. I doubt President Obama won over many of his opponents, but his civilized gesture in attending the caucus and his recognition that his opponents were citizens entitled to their views was unquestionably impressive. It really was a triumphant American moment.

Canadians like to believe that we are less partisan than our American friends, our politics less divided, our national conversation more civilized. But could our national leaders engage – in public – as President Obama did with the Republicans? Would Prime Minister Stephen Harper go to the Liberal caucus to discuss his actions, plans, and policies? Would the Conservatives in their turn invite Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff to their caucus?

Somehow to ask the question is to answer it. No, it couldn’t happen here. Our politics has become so partisan, so bitter, so contested that the very idea of a civil public conversation with opponents is impossible to contemplate. Instead we have Question Period in the House of Commons where point-scoring is the game and where insults substitute for answers.

Liberals, New Democrats, and Bloquistes, of course, will say that Prime Minister Harper is to blame for this state of affairs. It’s his hidden agenda, after all, that drives the political game. For their part, Conservatives will point their fingers at obstructionist Liberal Senators or at Denis Coderre and Ralph Goodale or even at Jack Layton and Thomas Mulcair. It’s all the Opposition’s fault, Tories will cry.

Almost no one inside or outside politics, however, would deny that the Canadian political system is on life support. The wonder is that anyone could have become exercised by prorogation. Who wants those people deciding anything? The result is the growing public contempt – and worse, public indifference, the prorogation protests notwithstanding – for those who govern us. Michael Ignatieff's extreme language in pronouncing Stephen Harper as undemocratic yesterday, today, and tomorrow is just as debilitating to the political process as the Conservatives' television advertisements that portrayed the Liberal leader as "just visiting."

So why doesn't Stephen Harper ask for an invitation to speak to the Liberal caucus? Why doesn't Michael Ignatieff seek to appear before the Conservative Members of Parliament? Could such appearances, open to the media and ideally televised, not help to reduce the rampant partisanship that has made Canadian politics a blood sport in which no one with sense wants to participate? Perhaps not; perhaps nothing short of a majority government can reduce our debilitating political gamesmanship. But a party leader who tried to emulate President Obama by dealing rationally and courteously with his political opponents might well be the beneficiary of a public mood that is desperate for the merest spark of civility. At the very least, the offer of such a meeting couldn't hurt.

J.L. Granatstein is Senior Research Fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.