

March 28, 2011

The lost art of the apology

The true significance of an apology has been lost and today's acts of alleged contrition often end up exacerbating the problem rather than solving it. And the most important apologies never get made at all.

By Brian Lee Crowley

It may seem that apologies in politics today are as common as snowflakes in winter. But because the true significance of an apology has been lost, today's acts of alleged contrition often end up exacerbating the problem rather than solving it. And the most important apologies never get made at all.

When you consider how heavily their character weighs on their chances of electoral success, you'd think that politicians would be acutely aware of how much of their character is revealed by their mistakes and how they handle them.

Take the tangle Justin Trudeau got into over the word "barbaric." He made every mistake in the book. First he refused to recognize that he had made a mistake, and spent a long time arguing with his critics. Character flaw number one: he has no empathy and cannot see his actions through the eyes of others.

Then, after a long delay in which he clearly got the worse of the exchanges with his critics, he made a far worse faux pas, an insincere apology: "Okay, final word: all violence against women is barbaric. If my concerns about language led some to think otherwise, then I gladly apologize."

Now people used to the standard politician's apology may be so inured to it that they cannot recognize the enraging tactic used here. This "apology" puts the blame on his critics. What it really says is, "If anyone was silly enough to be offended by what I did, then I guess I apologize, but only because their unreasonableness forces me to do so to make the problem go away." So to lack of empathy add character flaws two and three: insincerity and refusal to accept responsibility for your own acts.

There is a school of thought that apologies are to be avoided because they will be interpreted as evidence of a different kind of character flaw: weakness and lack of confidence in your own actions and decisions.

Those who live by the "never apologize" rule are harmed far more than they are helped by it. That would include the Harper Tories' gritty determination never to apologize for transgressions

such as the Oda memo or the attempt to obscure the costs of their crime and punishments policies or breaking the income trust promise. It would also include the Liberal Party's inability to get forgiveness for the Sponsorship Scandal or the National Energy Program.

Of course, not every demand for an apology deserves one. Sometimes you are right, not your critics, and it is important to be able to be objective. But if you've never admitted a mistake, it is not because you haven't made any.

Apologies allow you to move on, to turn the page. When properly done, they enhance your reputation. You don't look weak, but strong.

That's because the essence of an apology is humility. You humble yourself and ask sincerely for forgiveness, offering an explanation for why you made the mistake and undertakings about how you will do better in the future. Because everybody gets things wrong and everybody knows how hard it is to humble yourself and admit your mistakes, people actually admire the men and women who have the strength of character to do it.

Politicians, of course, fear the carping of the opposition pouncing on the admission of error. But a well-done apology robs that criticism of its force, because now it is the carpers who look arrogant and mean-spirited. The average person understands that all you can do is to own up to your actions and take responsibility. To continue to persecute an honourable man or woman who has humbled him or herself and asked forgiveness itself reveals a different character flaw, one that wins few friends or admirers.

One politician who got the political power of the good and timely apology was former Alberta premier Ralph Klein. Every once in a while Ralph would screw up on a big scale. A case in point was the time he showed up at a shelter, clearly in his cups, and got into an embarrassing and ill-tempered shouting match with some of the residents.

In very short order a contrite premier made a red-faced apology before the television cameras, took full responsibility for his actions, didn't try to blame his critics, recognized that he had a drinking problem and promised to fix it so that incidents like that would never happen again.

A powerful man humbled and humanized himself. The incident that gave rise to the apology was not forgotten, but rather forgiven, a distinction the no-apologies crew seems incapable of grasping. And Ralph Klein rose to new heights of popularity.

All because he knew how to say sorry and mean it.

Brian Lee Crowley is the managing director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, an independent non-partisan public policy think tank in Ottawa: www.macdonaldlaurier.ca.

news@hilltimes.com

The Hill Times