

“Canadians don’t trust politicians” So what?

BY

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Trust is contextual and defies broad-brush application. (Mis)trust in one place does not necessarily apply in another. The young straight-arrow in Accounting may be left unsupervised with large sums of cash. That doesn’t mean he’ll be left alone with my daughter any time soon. So trust is not universal. But where it exists, relationships run smooth. An absence of trust creates friction—and the world is sandpaper.

Yet, desperate to fill column inches and broadcast minutes with anything having a passing resemblance to election news, pollsters, pundits, and the press have again alerted us to the obvious: Canadians don’t trust politicians very much.

Well, d’uh! And, big deal. This is not a story. We’ve never trusted politicians. So what?

The real problem with this proclamation, bathed in scientific method and as earnest as Revelation, is that by carelessly bandying about the word “trust,” they miss the point and misdirect. I have to deal with sweeping pronouncements about trust: where it exists and how it affects commercial fortunes. So I’ve made a study of the subject and offer what I’ve learned to this situation.

In addition to trust being contextual, we don’t “trust” notions or ideas. We trust *people*; specifically individuals we know. And trust isn’t granted instantly anyway. People typically test relationships slowly to get comfortable with the other person. Thus is predictable and consistent *performance* a critical element of gaining and keeping trust.

With a record of requited faith in people of the same classification, we may even come to conditionally “trust” inasmuch as we develop certain expectations and afford members of that class the benefit of the doubt. This allows us to function in a social world, where it is impossible to interact only with those known directly and, arguably, intimately. Society has a natural and healthy trust deficit.

A vast body of proof corroborates the contention that there is a general trust shortfall in the world: it’s called *the law*. Laws exist because over time societies

gained the wisdom—through bad experiences—that anarchy is undesirable and honour can be fleeting. Reliable rules and penalties are needed. Notably, there does not exist a single field of human interaction without governing rules. What we actually “trust” in the many situations absent personal relationships or a history of comforting proof about individuals’ quality (i.e., real trust) is *the process*.

When Canadians say we don’t trust politicians, we are merely voicing an obvious and necessary truth.

Let’s start at the individual level. Trust in any given politician him/herself is more often than not a mere estimation of reliability from a distance based on past performance. The condition favours tenure—the longer we can observe a politician in action, the better our sense of his/her consistency and alignment to our own expectations. Of course, the polls report on the mirage of spun perception about party leadership. But most of us don’t and can’t know leaders personally. And, given that typically 10-65% of any constituency voted against its current member (and the governing party), broad-based trust for these *individuals* is dicey to begin with. Focus on the leader puts even the greater potential for trust in the local representative at risk because strict discipline of the parliamentary and party systems can leave the local MP at odds with constituents. This results in a trust deficit toward all individual politicians from the top on down.

By the logic presented, we could never have really trusted politicians anyway, so we need to read between the lines. What Canadians are really saying is that we’ve lost faith in the political systems and processes. How could we not? The Sponsorship scandal and the Airbus affair are only two of the larger, more recent breaches of faith in Canada. (Never mind the disturbing news from American politics.) We see entitlement mentality, featherbedding, and fiduciary breaches. We are witness to credulity-stretching gaps between what politicians say and what they do. We have tagged along to the nadir of civility with the partisan belching from all ranks. How are we to trust a person, group, and system that creates a rule and then breaks it to suit partisan political need?

Canadians don't trust politicians... So what!

The point is not whether Canadians trust politicians. We have, in fact, a well-founded and deep trust in the infinite capacity for politicians to disappoint us. But that's not the story.

The story is that the system has broken down. We never really trusted the people; now we're not so sure about institutions any more. We know that liars will lie, and have relied on the system to restrain it. But the checks to balance parties, politics, power, and policy have all but evaporated. "Things fall apart; the center can not hold."

If you're going to fill the space, at least cover the right story.

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