

The politics of cynicism

By Bill Kilpatrick

You can't trust the mainstream media, it's all owned by big business, government media is all propaganda, politicians are all alike, power corrupts, There's no point in voting as all politicians are all the same, truths are illusions who illusoriness is overlooked, follow the money, big business runs the government, if there's no evidence, I'm not believing it. Are the above statements skeptical or are they cynical? If you can't tell the difference you're probably not alone given how bad the paving is on the information highway these days. There's far more potholes to fall into and no guard rails, but since we're all driving on the same highway, we must have some basic rules that we all agree on as we travel on this information highway. One rule is that it is always better to be skeptical than cynical, especially during an election.

What is the difference between a skeptic and a cynic? According to an article in Behavioural Scientist, it turns out that many people struggle to tell the difference. Cynicism and skepticism are often confused for each other, but they couldn't be more different. Cynicism is a lack of faith in people; skepticism is a lack of faith in our assumptions. Cynics imagine humanity is awful; skeptics gather information about who they can trust. They hold on to beliefs lightly and learn quickly.

The amount of cynicism that was pumped into the ether during the COVID-19 pandemic was truly appalling. There was no one who could be trusted, doctors, professionals, nurses, drug companies, governments, the World Health Organization, scientists, and on and on. This cynicism then spilled over to vaccines, masks, and even to the pandemic itself. When you start an argument from a general base of mistrust of humanity and their motives your cynicism will know no bounds. I don't want to say that the pandemic normalized cynicism, but it certainly took it mainstream.

While many who took this cynical view often flouted their knowledge and the stupidity of the sheeple the facts about cynics are exactly what you would expect, they tend to be not as smart says an article in the Behavioural Scientist. It turns out cynicism is not a sign of wisdom, and more often it's the opposite. In studies of over 200,000 individuals across thirty nations, cynics scored less well on tasks that measure cognitive ability, problem-solving, and mathematical skill. Cynics aren't socially sharp, either, performing worse than non-cynics at identifying liars said the article. I'm not sure it would be fair to call 72 million Americans cynics, but it seems to fit the bill. In fact, the article goes on to point out that the belief that cynics are smarter than skeptics is so strong there is a name for the thinking error: the cynical genius illusion.

Now to be fair, we all have at some point said and did things that are cynical and as the article pointed out cynical behaviour is on a bell curve from mild to extreme, but there is no doubt that cynicism is on the rise, in everyone. It is especially bad right now given that we are in the middle of a federal election.

An article in ontherecordnews.ca points out that both the liberals and the conservatives are engaging in attack ads during this election, but it points out that Historically, the Liberals have released fewer attack ads than the Conservatives, but then the authors cynically state that this is only because the liberals have less money. The assumption is one of money not of ethics. However, the authors do point out something very important in terms of attack ads, they are meant to stir emotion not critical thinking They're meant to persuade; they're meant to affect you. They're not really meant to inform you. And if you want information, you'll have to dig more deeply than [attack ads].

However, people seem to be lacking their mental shovels as a March 2024 University of Michigan article points out Political anger and cynicism are rising in the United States and in many democracies worldwide, and both are associated with exposure to political attacks on social media. The authors of the study found that people who were exposed to more political attacks [that were hostile, uncivil and attacking] on social media were more politically cynical, and that perceived exposure to these attacks was associated with more anger about the state of the U.S., which was subsequently related to greater levels of political cynicism. The same is happening in Canada.

The University of Michigan article defines political cynicism as 'an attitude that's rooted in distrust of political actors' motivations. It goes further than healthy skepticism, they say, because it involves wholesale rejection of people and processes in democracy, and an underlying belief that politicians are guided by corrupt, self-serving, personal interests, rather than service to the public good.' While attack ads are not as numerous in Canada, Canadians are not immune to this type of toxic political rhetoric or its effects.

It's important to remember that these same style of attack ads have been used in Russia, Hungary, Turkey, and the United States with devastating results on their democratic structures and institutions. These ads are designed to breed cynicism with the ultimate goal that people abandon hope and disengage in politics all together and submit to those who would see our democracies replaced by authoritarian and autocratic governments. One of the authors of the University of Michigan article points out that while 'Cynicism can be a rational response to actual corruption and breaches of trust by those in power, [however, the recent rise in political cynicism] is a matter of concern among scholars of democracy because of its potential to delegitimize democratic processes, reinforce negative attitudes, distort people's interpretations of political information, and cause some citizens to withdraw from politics.'

The world is at a turning point where the old liberal democratic values and structures that were put in place after the Second World War are being challenged and dismantled by authoritarians. Attack ads are but one of the tools that are being used to sow distrust and cynicism in our most cherished institutions which are the foundations of our freedom and democracy: government, academia, science and the media. It has never been more important to be a skeptic and use your critical skills to gather information about who you can trust during this election and then vote, vote, vote. Vote like it might be your last time, because the way the world is going it just might be.