



ERIKA SHAKER

Avoiding the Trap of High Hopes and Low Standards

I'll begin with a quick apology to *Our Schools/Our Selves* readers: this fall issue is later than I'd have liked. We were rushing to complete our *2016 Agenda for Social Change*, the CCPA's social justice calendar (see the corresponding ad in this issue). And, like so many others, we at the CCPA were almost exclusively focused on the recent federal election — from which we're, to some extent, (and no doubt like many of our readers) still recovering.

On October 19th, after the longest campaign in recent history, the Liberals under Justin Trudeau were elected to a majority government in a crimson haze of Trudeaumania 2.0; Jack-Layton-esque hope/change/optimism branding; and anti-Harper sentiment (or, perhaps more accurately, fear of what a re-elected Conservative government would mean) as lifelong Liberals, self-defined progressives, and first-time voters threw their support behind the party with the greatest momentum and who most unapologetically trumpeted the message “we're the opposite of Harper”.

Two weeks later, Canadians were treated to the masterfully-crafted swearing-in of the gender-balanced Cabinet and the new, youthful, highly photogenic Prime Minister, against a backdrop of a perfect autumn day complete with blue sky and fall foliage. And within hours, promises were being made: a new “tone” for government; Justin

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Trudeau practically body-surfing into crowds of cheering onlookers; media stunned at their proximity to a real life PM after years of being kept a safe distance away from an apparently hermetically-sealed one; the return of the mandatory long-form Census; the words “climate change” added to the Environment Minister’s title; a First Nations’ woman as Federal Justice Minister.

The giddiness continues: nice things are being said to a battered and shell-shocked public service; the Canadian Labour Congress was addressed by a sitting Prime Minister for the first time since Diefenbaker; scientists are being told they can once again talk about their research *in public and to the media*; and of course there are the selfies, selfies and more selfies.

The analysis is still being done about the messages that resonated, the turning points in the campaign (was it the niqab? The balanced budget promise? The too-safe stance of the NDP? Justin’s legendary charisma?) and whether or not this truly ushers in a new, progressive, era in politics.

“Canada is back!” announced Justin to the world.

But are we? And back to what, exactly?

Don’t get me wrong. I think another four years of a Conservative government would have been devastating to what remained of our political and social infrastructure. I’m also still mourning the loss of my local MP who exemplified hard work, compassion, and commitment to public service.

But I also think it’s a huge mistake for those reeling from the reduction of the NDP to third party status to condemn or belittle those who are experiencing a sense of relief, pride, warm familiarity and renewal that gave the swearing-in ceremony the feel of a coronation.

Clearly, for the foreseeable future, the Liberal government has at its disposal a deep well of desire on the part of Canadians to feel better (let alone good) about ourselves as a country, after nearly a decade of consciously feeling so embarrassed — if not depressed. As a friend of mine in the public service (who, while not on the video of Trudeau triumphantly visiting the newly-christened Global Affairs Canada, was in the room) explained: “we don’t expect this to be perfect, and of course it’s not going to last forever. But it feels so good to just not feel so bad about ourselves and the work we do.”

I’ve talked to a number of public servants who have echoed that sentiment. They’re not naïve — many of them have been through the

earlier rounds of austerity under the Chretien-Martin Liberals — and they're fully aware that this is a temporary state of euphoria. But they're also realizing how deeply they had internalized a negative sense of self-worth and, more disturbingly, how so much of this happened without us realizing it, or even (certainly where much of the media was concerned) with our tacit acceptance. We were the proverbial frogs in boiling water.

This is the space the new Liberal government inhabits — the space between extremely high hopes for what a new administration can bring, and our exceedingly low standards that were forcibly downgraded over the past nine years. It's a dangerous combination, where basic civility and common courtesy can *pass* as groundbreaking, at a time when *truly* groundbreaking policies are needed.

Here's the other thing: we are emerging from what's been referred to as a "lost decade". But it's a mistake to think that merely "undoing the damage" of the Harper Conservatives is all that's required to return Canada to its honourable reputation — assuming it ever really existed.

Because let's be honest: 10 years ago, we were disappointing; coasting on the fumes of our romanticized and whitewashed Pearsonian/Trudeau Sr,-esque identity.

By 2015, however, we'd become embarrassing.

The stakes are so much higher now — locally, nationally, and globally. Let's hope we don't truly think that a return to our pre-Harper state of disappointing is anywhere near enough; that our standards haven't fallen *that* far.

We are certainly dealing with the fallout of a decade-long concerted and unapologetic attack on Charter rights; on equality; on people living in poverty; on racialized people; on First Nations; on women; on the environment; on science, information and data; on food security; on basic safety regulations (or, as they've been renamed, job killers!); on the public service; and on our social programs.

But let's not pretend that the decade prior to this one — replete with tax cuts, slashed spending and the loosening of funding requirements — had no impact on many of those same things. Of course it did, as any number of articles in past issues of *Our Schools/Our Selves* demonstrate.

The effects of systemic underfunding on our classrooms. Attacks on teachers, education workers and their unions. The privileging

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

of standardized curriculum and assessments over inquiry-based, play-based, child-centred classrooms. Increasing emphasis on more market-friendly studies over the arts. Child poverty. Family poverty. Municipal underfunding and the closing of inner-city schools. Fewer supports for vulnerable students and students at risk. And, in response, educators working to bring social justice programs — among them: anti-racism education, structural inequality analysis, climate justice, Indigenous studies — to the classroom and to lecture halls.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* is an opportunity to explore many of these same topics that have resulted from the fallout of... well, let's just say *more than a decade* of neglect, downloading, and diminishment. It examines how communities are fighting back against attacks on public education; the use of the arts to explore issues of social justice and labour history; the effects of misogyny in our society, legal systems and educational institutions; restorative justice; teaching students about sustainability, belonging, and autonomy through a school garden; and the impact of neoliberalism on public schools and universities, and how to resist it.

It's a wide-ranging and thought-provoking collection that comes at a time when we need to be thinking — hard — about where we're currently at, how we got here, and where we need to get to if we are truly committed to progress, fairness, sustainability and equality. It reinforces the fact that while the latest big challenge — personified by our past-PM — may have been vanquished, there will always be other challenges to overcome. And it's a reminder that, in the face of high hopes, low standards are never permissible when it comes to social justice.

My sincere thanks to all the authors who contributed to this issue, and to Nancy Reid for her talent and artistry. Have a very happy fall.

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