POLITICS AND THE TRIBE

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Viken L. Attarian, Mount Royal, 29 April 2011

I chose the title of this essay after realizing that one of the most important electoral battles of the May 2, 2011 Federal election is being fought right where I live, in the town of Mount Royal. The battle being the one for the Jewish votes and who would they elect, the Liberal incumbent or the Conservative challenger, or perhaps even the NDP challenger? All three of course are of Jewish origin. In fact, the NDP candidate, Mr. Ictush, even had flyers distributed to the homes citing as his achievement his board membership in both the Quebec and Canadian Jewish Congresses. Mr. Cotler, the Liberal incumbent, has a whole list of achievements to his credit which are not focused on his birth origin but rather on his track record as an MP, a former Justice Minister and an international track record and reputation as a principled defender of human rights. The Conservative candidate proudly smiles at those who look at his political signs sporting a *kippah* on his head, leaving no doubt as to what his "provenance" is, and presumably what he is supposed to stand for.

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The issue has also been covered extensively by both the local and the national media. In fact, the venerable radio program, *The Current*, of the even more venerable CBC, devoted a whole half-hour broadcast to the topic on April 21st.
You may wish to listen to it or read about it here: CBC.CA

What was even more extraordinary about that same broadcast was that it had three Jewish panelists who, in a very articulate fashion, explained their relevant perspectives with an emerging single message. Mainly, that a Jewish voter should go beyond the issue of the staunch support of Stephen Harper for Israel and basically not sink to that level of tribalism.

In fact, one of the panelists, Mr. Elliott Leven, a lawyer from Winnipeg, remarkably summed up the issue as follows: Is Stephen Harper a *mensch*? That being a Yiddish word for a "decent, compassionate human being" as he put it. And because he thought that Harper was definitely not a *mensch*, therefore he suggested that Jews or anybody else who think that we need decent people in politics should refrain from voting for Harper or his party.

What Mr. Leven was saying is that ideas matter, as well as individuals, their actions and their track records. He was challenging Jewish voters not to be a tribe, but to be thinking individuals. He was, unbeknownst to himself, teaching Armenians a lesson

Now, the reader might of course wonder why I have used such adjectives as "remarkable" and "extraordinary", well, I don't think I am exaggerating.

Let me explain.

What would happen, if in a riding with many Arab voters, the three main federal parties ran candidates of Arab origin with some even citing their contributions to the Canadian Muslim Federation as broad evidence of their civic involvement? Furthermore, if the sole issue of who to vote for was framed as to which party best acted in the interests of the PLO, or even, if one of the candidates was photographed sporting a *keffiyeh* head scarf? What would be the reaction of the mainstream media or of the population at large?

I am sure that you can come up with many answers, which would include even a questioning of putting the interests of a foreign state in a priority vs. those of Canada, but I am also sure that none of your analyses would contain any flattery addressed to those who pander to such base instincts and who essentially focus on a policy of division, of pitting one ethnic origin against another.

So why would it be acceptable if such politics is applied to the so-called Jewish vote? Mr. Leven seems to think that it is actually insulting to the intelligence of the Jewish voters, and I think so too.

That was the first thought exercise.

For the second one, you need to be a little more imaginative. Read the scenario and answer each question at the end. Only Yes or No answers allowed. No nuances.

Scenario 1: Let's say Armenia is an autocratic kleptocracy. The regime ruthlessly oppresses religious and other minorities. Corruption is rampant. One of the Federal political parties running for office in Canada declares that it will support the government of Armenia in every single move the latter

makes and will defend that regime in all international forums. This Federal party may or may not have domestic Canadian policies you agree with. Do you vote for this party?

Scenario 2: Let's say a Federal Canadian party declared that it will advance the cause of the recognition of the Genocide of Armenians everywhere across Canada and even in international forums. This party has other policies which you vehemently disagree with and that you think are detrimental for Canada as a whole. Do you vote for this party?

Scenario 3: Let's say Armenia is still an autocratic kleptocracy. The regime ruthlessly oppresses religious minorities and its opponents. Corruption is rampant. A Canadian Federal party declares that, if elected, it will support all democratic and institutional reforms in Armenia. That same party however, when in government, has not supported the recognition of the Genocide of Armenians, although most of its MPs individually have. This Federal party may or may not have domestic policies you agree with. Do you vote for this party?

Scenario 4: In this scenario, the specific issue of Armenia is irrelevant. However, the Federal party I would like you to consider has had a consistent foreign policy based on a humanitarian approach, multilateralism, institution building as well as civic society building. Furthermore, if elected, this party promises to actively support the inclusion of the Genocide of Armenians in the official high-school curriculums of all provinces. This Federal party may or may not have other domestic Canadian policies you agree with. Do you vote for this party?

Now this is a very legitimate thought exercise. Why? Because it unmasks our own hidden tribalism. As you move down the scenarios, you might be tempted to answer with a "Yes", or even feel that the answer is a resounding "Yes". And yet, in my view, even Scenario 4 should not be so clear cut.

Remember the original premise? Yes or No, no nuances allowed. That is the crux of the matter.

Because ultimately, a Yes or a No is exclusively about a tribe.

Yes vs. No. Us vs. Them. "Are you with us?" vs. "Are you against us?". Separate from Canada vs. Stay in Canada. Eastern Canada vs. Western Canada. The French vs. The English. Ottawa vs. The Provinces. Quebec vs. The Rest of Canada. Rural Canada vs. The city folks. The Jew vs. The Arab. The Christian vs. The Muslim. Black vs. White. A majority vs. a minority.

Politics turned into a game of continuous referenda.

Granted, such "politics" can succeed and can bring those who pursue such divisions to power (even with democratic elections. After all, if you remember your history, it is how the Nazis came to power).

Yet, it would be a system which has become only an illusion of democracy and is never the real thing.

Politics in my world is about ideas. Therefore, it is about nuances. It is about shades of grey. It is about coalitions and alliances. It is about finding common ground. It is about a vision of society of the future that we want to build. It might be about taxes, but only as a means, not as an objective. And democracy is absolutely never about referenda, precisely because it cannot divide. It needs to listen to the other, to engage the other, to create a common purpose with the other. And that common purpose cannot be reached with exclusion.

Being in a tribe might make us feel comfortable. I would suggest though, that in the end, it is a false comfort of base instincts. It is a denial of our humanity. Why? Because what make us fundamentally human are three things, concern about other humans, our ability to think independently, and our consciousness of ourselves. Any form of denial of any of these three interlinked characteristics is equivalent to denying our humanity.

The tribe denies all three. It wants you to be concerned exclusively about the tribe, it does not want you to think critically, and the individual never matters.

The real politics of ideas, the real exercise of democracy is about affirming our humanity.

You can affirm your tribe. Or, you can affirm your humanity.

It is your choice.