

POWER AND POLITICS

By Ed Corrigan

There is a political war presently raging in Canada and around the World. Partisans of Israel and the Lebanese and Palestinian people clash in media, on the internet and in the political arena.

Both Jews and Arabs claim that truth and justice are on their side. All claim God supports them.

Truth and justice are powerful weapons in the right hands if there is support for these ideals or principles. However, you are largely wasting your time unless you directly impact politicians where it counts, in the corridors of power, in the leadership races, nomination fights, in elections, in fund raising and on the ground political organization. Organization, dedication, commitment and resources are also key considerations. Politicians by necessity have to deal with political realities.

In politics, perception is reality. Most individuals will not look beyond the surface and will base their judgements on their perception or feeling about an issue. Public opinion is fickle and subject to drastic changes depending on the last media image. The impact on 9/11 on public perceptions is a case in point. People also have a tremendous capacity to see things the way they want to.

Actions speak louder than words, or emails. Organizing protests, sending form letters and post cards to Members of Parliament, calling your local politician, signing petitions, voting on line may make you feel better but are largely ineffectual at bringing real change. The general rule is

that when you are protesting on the street you have already lost.

A personal letter sent or faxed to the appropriate individuals may have some impact. It is recognized that this person invested some time in writing the letter and that it reflects a degree of commitment to an issue. Numbers clearly count and if many letters are received on an issue it will attract the attention of the politician or decision maker. It represents a potential political threat. This is especially the case if it is seen as a hot button issue. @

Form letters, petitions require very little effort and display little or no commitment from the signer. These actions do not represent a long term threat. If the numbers are significant, it demonstrates some organizational ability and public interest. This activity represents a potential threat if the same organizational ability were directed at a key pressure point in the power structure. However, most of the time this energy is dissipated and has little or no lasting effect. The mass demonstrations against the War on Iraq is a good example.

Email campaigns are also largely ignored as elected officials are keenly aware of mass emailers and how easy it is to send an email to an elected official. A typical politician receives as many as a thousand emails a day. This number is overwhelming and are too many to effectively respond to or track. Politicians do normally respond to and keep track of emails from constituents as they represent voters that can affect their political future.

Campaigns that generate huge numbers of support will attract the attention of politicians and the media because there is a perception that the views have grass root support or widespread public support. However, there are Areal grass root campaigns@ and there are campaigns that are

Aastroturf or Artificial grass root campaigns. These Artificial campaigns are where a small group try to give the appearance of wide spread public support. With resources and organization a small group can greatly exaggerate their political power. These artificial campaigns demonstrate a degree of organizational ability, resources and a committed group of individuals to an issue or cause.

There are many dedicated politicians who try to do the right thing. However, if these politicians cannot mobilize support behind their candidacy and issues, then they will lose or have to adopt other issues to succeed. Politics ruthlessly weeds out individuals who do not have adequate support.

Politicians have to have a support base to succeed. There are many ways to build a support base. Building a base on family, a constituency group, a community group, an ethnic group or a religious community or a political group or party is the normal method of securing a base. If you do not have a base of supporters, financial support and organizational skills, your career in politics will be short. Money can make up for a lot of deficiencies in other areas. This is especially the case in media style elections that dominate today's politics.

Some issues are more important than other issues. Many people will have opinions but will not act upon them. AHot buttons are issues that will cause individuals to take action and determine voting behavior. It is the issues that decide voting behavior that are critical to the political process and generally determine how politicians respond. If politicians believe that the issue is

not going to determine voting behavior then it is not important.

A Wedge issue is one that divides the population and, in particular, the voting public. If you can split a voting block into two or more groups, a minority of voters could give you the support necessary to win an election. How you split the vote is frequently the key determinant in deciding who wins?

Participating in political organizations and political parties, learning how to have an impact in politics, raising money for campaigns, organizing elections and doing the political ground work is vital to becoming politically effective. Even just taking a sign or making a small donation shows a measure of political involvement. If you are a direct participant as a decision maker, i.e., as an elected official, or have direct access to a decision maker, these are the most effective ways to have your views heard and opinions acted upon.

In Canada federal elections usually have around a 60% voter turnout. Provincial elections have around a 50% voter turnout. Municipal elections have around a 35% voter turnout. The last election in the United States had only a 40 percent turnout. President Bush won with around 20% of the electorate supporting him. A majority of Americans had no say in deciding who represented them. Individuals and groups that participate in the election determine the outcome and decide who has political power and who controls the apparatus of government. Those that do not vote do not count in the election results.

The 2006 Canadian federal Liberal Leadership race is an excellent example. For a nominal fee one could become a member of the Liberal Party of Canada and help determine who was going to be the next leader of the Liberals and possibly who was going to be the next prime minister of Canada. This was a once in a decade opportunity to have a real impact on politics. The deadline for buying memberships and to eligible to vote in the leadership race was July 4, 2006. If you are not a current member you cannot vote to help determine the new leader. Could you imagine the impact of 10,000 voters committed to an important issue and how it could affect Canada=s future? The same applies to all political parties or organizations.

If there is a large constituency inside the Party supporting an issue, the politicians would be courting that support. A large group of voters committed to a set of ideals and policies gets the attention of the politicians. Membership numbers, organization, commitment and money are key determinants in leadership races and electoral battles.

Nomination meetings are one of the key control points in the political system. Having a stable and supportive constituency association and executive is another. For example, delivering 100 individuals to a contested nomination meeting and delivering a vote to a candidate that supported your political views represents real political power. If you could deliver 500 committed voters to support an issue, or an individual that supports a cause dear to your heart, you could be decisive on the outcome. If you could deliver a 1000 or 2000 voters to a meeting, you could have political control of that meeting. Some nomination meetings in Toronto have had as many a 15,000 party members deciding who their candidate will be.

Organizing for such political battles is a military exercise. Getting the troops to the voting booth is critical. It is a test of organization and of support. If you can win a nomination battle then you should be a suitable candidate with a large base of support and some organizational ability.

In elections in Canada, a local candidate is only considered to have an impact of 3-5% on the outcome. In today=s media driven politics, it is the national campaign that usually determines the election. However, many elections are decided by small margins and a strong candidate can make all the difference in winning or losing a political contest. To form a government you need to win each constituency one by one. In today=s divided politics many elections are often won by small margins. Here an organized group could have a decisive impact on an electoral outcome.

Politics is also coalition building, compromise and working to achieve realistic political goals. This requires focus and not being distracted by side issues or irrelevant factors. It is also hard work and requires a degree of discipline and organization. It also requires money.

Supporting politicians who work for your causes and support your political beliefs and actually do something about the issue is the best way to bring about real political change. Getting involved is a good start. Learning how to make politics work is a very important skill.

Politicians respond to power and political realities. They really have very little other choice. Ten individuals who take action are more effective than a thousand who do nothing but complain.

One can also have an impact in the market place and in the economy. Boycotting a particular countries goods or even just buying another product because you do not like their stand on a particular issue. Could you imagine the impact of 300 million Arabs not buying American products to protest U.S. foreign policy? What would be the impact of 1 billion Moslems boycotting American goods and buying other countries products that are more in line with their political views?

There is a saying: In politics there are those who make things happen, there are those who watch things happen and there are those who wonder what the heck just happened. You have to decide what category you belong to.

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