

Canadians should be less polite – and more civil

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

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Canadians have a reputation for politeness. We're chronic apologizers – even for the mistakes of others. We avoid scandal and controversy (which is why we like our politicians on the vanilla side). We're “nice,” we're told. We take great pride in our polish – especially in comparison to the loud, vulgar Americans just south of us.

This reputation has its benefits. We're [universally adored](#). Some non-Canadian nationals even make a practice, when they travel internationally, of affixing Canadian flags to their luggage and wearing Canadian pins in hopes of better treatment while abroad.

Considerateness toward others supports a flourishing human community, but too much politeness can also harm our freedom. It can silence ideas that need to be aired and repress conversations that must be had.

Some may think that Canada's culture of politeness is embedded – perhaps mandated – by [a phrase used in Section 91 of the British North America Act of 1867](#): “peace, order and good government.”

However, preserving peace, order and good government is more effectively realized by grappling with deep difference – not ignoring or merely glossing over disagreements, sweeping them under the rug and pretending that all is well.

Today, Canadians often use “politeness” to silence others. Very often, these calls for politeness are made by people in positions of power to keep the powerless powerless.

Perhaps now is the time for Canadians to be less polite – and become more civil.

Civility and politeness are very different things.

Politeness is a technique, behaviour, manners. It is external and superficial.

Civility, by contrast, is internal. It is a disposition of respecting the equal moral worth and basic dignity of our fellow human beings and caring about them enough to risk offending them by discussing both sides of an issue.

Crucially, sometimes actually respecting others requires breaking the rules of politeness.

Telling hard truths, or engaging in robust debate, takes courage. It’s often hard to tell someone that you think they’re wrong. It’s far more comfortable to be “polite,” and just to keep our opinions to ourselves. Even discussing politics or religion at the dinner table are topics that traditional politeness has forbidden.

Telling hard truths and debating difficult questions is at times an indispensable means of truly showing respect, love and service to others. Telling hard truths to others is one example of conduct that seems impolite and is difficult for Canadians to do, because we risk offending others – but it flows from the disposition of civility, of recognizing and affirming their basic human dignity.

The etymologies of the words support this distinction. The word “polite” comes from the Latin *polire*, which means “to polish, to make smooth.” Politeness focuses on external appearances; it is about “smoothing over” and diminishing our differences instead of equipping us to act in light of them.

The term “civility,” however, comes from the Latin *civilis*, which relates to the status, conduct and character befitting a citizen of the *civitas*, or city. Civility is about the habits and duties of citizenship. Again, this often involves acting in ways that appear impolite, such as having an uncomfortable but necessary conversation.

Too often, Canadians seem to shy away from taking strong stands on issues, or expressing controversial opinions. We don't want to offend others. This courteous impulse undermines our freedom when it prevents us from having debates about important ideas.

We can't be so worried about offending others that we avoid important conversations. The defining question of democracy is this: How do we flourish across difference?

For our democracy to survive, and for us to thrive as a country, we must be able to disagree and navigate competing interests. We must be willing to risk offending others in the collective pursuit of truth.

It's essential to respect ourselves enough to voice our opinions when we disagree with others or a party line. And respecting others requires listening to them when they dissent. Unfortunately, our culture of politeness inhibits both the inclination to disagree, and our ability to hear disagreement.

I learned firsthand that there is bias inherent to what a society deems polite and appropriate conduct.

Growing up in Canada as a strong, forthright woman in a family of strong women wasn't always easy. When we didn't fit the mould, we were chastised, reprimanded, barred, pushed out and silenced. I was often criticized for being too assertive or disagreeable by male authority figures in my life. I didn't fit the dominant cultural expectation of how a woman should act, and I was reprimanded for it. When I spoke with passion, I was dismissed as being "hysterical." When my view differed from others, I was deemed "disagreeable."

A culture that places inordinate focus on politeness harms those who fail to conform to a certain expectation of propriety – and inordinately harms historically disadvantaged groups, such as women, and linguistic and ethnic subcultures.

Our ability to come together across differences in background around Canada's shared values of democracy and the rule of law is a triumph. Canada should be proud of its multicultural ideals. Civility – not politeness – can help us live up to them.

Focusing less on politeness – choosing to be less concerned about whether everyone is following a certain standard of "rules" of etiquette – and more on

civility, which elevates truly respecting others (as opposed to just giving lip service to doing so), can help Canada be the inclusive and multicultural country that we aspire to be.

In our public discourse today, we worry too much about decorum, tone, demeanour, and that the “correct” words are used – all of which are the realm of politeness.

We must critically consider whether the social norms we follow and expect of others actually communicate basic respect for others, or merely pretend to.

A lack of “acceptable tone” can often be an excuse to dismiss an idea or person out of hand instead of giving them and their ideas a fair hearing.

Our democratic institutions that preserve free expression are important.

We must also seek to cultivate and preserve a culture that promotes our freedom, too.

Our public leaders can and should model an emphasis on civility – which facilitates debate and dialogue across difference – over mere politeness.

There’s a temptation for politicians to patronize voters, sheltering them from hard truths that they don’t want to hear. This politeness is self-serving: Politicians avoid hard truths for fear of losing public favour and being ousted from office. Instead, Canada deserves leaders who respect citizens enough to communicate hard messages, even if doing so is impolite.

Our public leaders should set the tone and lead by example in choosing civility over mere politeness.

The rudeness and lack of decorum that define many parliamentary debates in Ottawa might seem like an attempt to puncture the suffocating culture of politeness in Canada.

But the gladiatorial tone of heated rhetoric in Parliament rather misses the point. It’s often merely showboating, meant to perform for the media.

I learned the shortcomings of both hostility and politeness firsthand during my own time in government working on Parliament Hill in the spring of 2013. I worked alongside some good people, but I also observed two tactics that seemed to help people succeed in government: punishing ruthlessness or

extreme politesse. At first, I thought these two modes were opposites, two poles on the spectrum.

But reflecting on this experience over the years has helped me come to realize extreme politeness and extreme hostility and rudeness are actually two sides of the same coin. Both modes instrumentalize others. Both fail to sufficiently respect others as ends in themselves. Both fail to see human beings as they really are: beings with dignity and worthy of respect. Both modes also handicap us from productive conversation and prevent us from usefully addressing deep and difficult issues.

It is almost instinctual in Canadian politics that we can defer the controversy for another – and hope it goes away in the meantime. We think that politeness will save us an uncomfortable conversation now – so we pass it off for future generations to deal with.

Reclaiming civility in a nation that values politeness isn't a job for our public leaders only.

It's a job for us, as everyday Canadians, too. We can each be a part of the solution in how we interact with one another. We can start by discarding mere politeness – which polices tone, focuses inordinately on the “rules” of one dominant standard of etiquette, and avoids uncomfortable conversations.

We can instead choose civility – a disposition of the heart that actually respects and seeks the good of others, and sometimes, courageously, speaks the truth in love – in our every day.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canadians-should-be-less-polite-and-more-civil/>

Echoes with some recent “Reconciliation” initiatives. But even here I doubt a true willingness for “unpleasant conversations” that can bite both ways.

I spent a year at the Calgary Jewish Academy. I had never seen arguments like we had in staff meetings. Anywhere else, everyone would have gone home and started looking for another job. But here, instead teachers came back to the school next day like nothing different had happened (perhaps true). Jews can come up short in politeness, but they demonstrate civility and reasoned debate. It made me marvel at the Israeli Knesset, but I am also left wondering if the Jewish state could survive without enemies who can be demonized.

An immigrant friend of mine, long-experienced in being a “foreigner” in different countries, though grateful to be here, has little trust in Canadian “politeness” that merely masks prejudice and behind-your-back disrespect.