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Week Two: Can You Disagree Without Becoming the Enemy?

Somewhere along the way, we forgot the difference between disagreement and disrespect.

Today, it often feels as though expressing a different opinion is enough to earn a label. Too progressive. Too conservative. Too moderate. Too outspoken. Too cautious. Too loyal. Not loyal enough.

Politics has become less interested in asking why someone believes something and more interested in deciding whether they belong.

That should concern all of us.

Democracy has never required unanimous agreement. In fact, it depends on disagreement. Different perspectives, different experiences and different priorities are not flaws in our political system. They are the very reason it exists.

The danger comes when we stop seeing disagreement as part of democracy and start treating it as a threat to democracy.

That is a mistake I believe every political movement is making.

The Loudest Voices Rarely Represent the Majority

Spend enough time on social media and you could be forgiven for believing Canada has become irreparably divided.

Every issue becomes a battle.

Every debate becomes a crisis.

Every disagreement becomes a moral test.

Algorithms reward outrage because outrage keeps us scrolling.

The loudest voices receive the most attention.

The most extreme opinions often receive the most engagement.

But that is not the Oxford County I know.

Serving as President of the Oxford Provincial Liberal Association and Vice Chair of the Oxford Federal Liberal Association has given me the privilege of spending countless hours talking with people across our communities. Not just during election campaigns, but throughout the year at fall fairs, community events, Pride celebrations, local fundraisers, service clubs, coffee shops and on doorsteps across the county.

Those conversations rarely resemble the ones happening online.

I've met lifelong Conservatives who have thanked me for standing up for inclusion while telling me they'll probably never vote Liberal.

I've met New Democrats who challenged my thinking on affordability and environmental issues while sharing my belief that everyone deserves a fair shot in life.

I've met people who have never belonged to any political party but still wanted to talk about healthcare, housing, agriculture and the future of their community.

None of those conversations ended with complete agreement.

Almost all of them ended with mutual respect.

That is because real life is more complicated than social media allows it to be.

Most Canadians are thoughtful.

Most Canadians are willing to listen.

Most Canadians simply want someone willing to listen back.

Democracy Depends on Difficult Conversations

One of the greatest lessons politics has taught me is that meaningful conversations rarely happen between people who already agree on everything.

They happen when people are willing to sit down with someone whose experiences, priorities or political beliefs are different from their own.

Too often, we have convinced ourselves that talking to someone with different political beliefs somehow weakens our own convictions.

I believe the opposite.

If our values are worth defending, they should also be strong enough to withstand honest conversation.

Listening to someone who disagrees with us does not require us to abandon what we believe.

It simply requires enough confidence to hear another perspective.

The older I get, the more convinced I become that democracy is strengthened every time two people choose conversation over contempt.

Not because either side is guaranteed to change their mind.

But because both leave with a better understanding of why the other believes what they do.

That is true whether we are speaking with Liberals, Conservatives, New Democrats, Greens or Canadians who have never belonged to any political party.

A political movement that refuses to listen will eventually find itself with no one left to persuade.

A political movement that listens with confidence will always have room to grow.

Every Political Party Needs Honest Disagreement

One of the greatest misconceptions in politics is that unity means everyone saying the same thing.

It does not.

Over the past several years, I have sat through more riding association meetings, campaign strategy sessions, executive meetings and policy discussions than I can count.

Some of the strongest conversations happened because someone was willing to respectfully disagree.

Someone asked a difficult question.

Someone challenged a long held assumption.

Someone offered a perspective the rest of the room had not considered.

Almost every time, the final decision was stronger because those conversations happened.

That has reinforced something I believe deeply.

Healthy political parties should debate.

They should challenge assumptions.

They should test ideas before presenting them to Canadians.

That is true for the Ontario Liberal Party.

It is true for the Liberal Party of Canada.

It is true for New Democrats, Conservatives, Greens and every democratic political movement.

If every meeting ends with unanimous agreement, I begin to wonder whether anyone felt comfortable enough to ask the difficult questions.

Loyalty should never mean silence.

It should mean caring enough about the future of a movement to make it better.

Healthy disagreement is not division.

It is leadership.

Listening Is Not Losing

One lesson I continue to learn through community organizing is that listening changes people.

Sometimes it changes the person speaking.

Sometimes it changes the person listening.

More often than not, it changes both.

Listening is one of the most underrated forms of leadership.

It communicates respect without requiring agreement.

It allows people to explain not only what they believe, but why they believe it.

That distinction matters.

When someone tells me they are worried about affording a home, keeping their family farm afloat, finding a family doctor or making sure their children have opportunities close to home, my first instinct is not to ask how they voted in the last election.

It is to ask another question.

"Tell me more."

Community organizing has taught me that people rarely want politicians to have every answer.

They want to know someone is genuinely listening.

People rarely change their minds because they were embarrassed, mocked or shouted down.

They change their minds because someone respected them enough to continue the conversation.

That is the kind of politics I want to be part of.

We Need Fewer Purity Tests

Every political movement faces the temptation to decide who is Liberal enough.

Or Conservative enough.

Or New Democrat enough.

I believe that temptation weakens us all.

The Liberal tradition has always been strongest when it has welcomed people with different experiences, different priorities and different perspectives under one roof.

That does not mean abandoning principles.

It means recognizing that broad coalitions are built through conversation, not conformity.

One of the strengths of the Liberal tradition has always been its ability to bring together people who do not agree on everything but who share a common belief that Canada can always become a little fairer, a little stronger and a little more hopeful.

That is not a weakness.

It is one of our greatest competitive advantages.

If someone agrees with us on every issue, we have gained another supporter.

If someone agrees with us on eight out of ten issues, we have gained a partner.

Politics begins to fail when we decide those last two disagreements matter more than the eight shared values.

Big tents are not built by demanding perfection.

They are built by making room.

Democracy Is Built on Good Faith

One phrase has become increasingly rare in politics.

Good faith.

We are quick to assume the worst motives in people we disagree with.

We assume they are ignorant.

We assume they are malicious.

We assume they simply do not care.

Sometimes those assumptions are justified.

Most of the time they are not.

The overwhelming majority of Canadians want safe communities.

Strong healthcare.

Affordable housing.

Economic opportunity.

A cleaner environment.

A country that leaves the next generation better off than the last.

They simply disagree about how to get there.

Recognizing that does not weaken our convictions.

It strengthens our democracy.

Because once we stop questioning each other's motives, we can begin debating each other's ideas.

That is where progress happens.

Democracy Begins Around the Kitchen Table

The older I get, the more convinced I become that democracy is not built on social media.

It is built around kitchen tables.

On front porches.

At church suppers.

At community fundraisers.

At fall fairs.

At Pride celebrations.

On doorsteps.

In the places where neighbours still choose conversation over condemnation.

That is the Oxford County I have been fortunate enough to know.

It is not perfect.

We disagree.

Sometimes passionately.

But I have watched people who vote Liberal, Conservative and New Democrat organize food drives together.

I have watched volunteers from different political backgrounds raise money for local charities.

I have watched neighbours show up for one another after fires, storms and personal tragedies without ever asking how the other person voted.

Politics should aspire to look more like that.

Over the next three weeks, this series will continue exploring what Big Tent Politics means in practice.

Because I remain convinced that the future of Liberalism, and perhaps the future of Canadian democracy itself, will not depend on whether we eliminate disagreement.

It will depend on whether we remember that the people who disagree with us are still our neighbours.

They are still members of our communities.

They are still Canadians.

And they are still worth talking to.

That is the politics I believe in.

Not because it is easier.

Because I believe it is the only kind of politics capable of building a bigger tent.

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