



THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

August 26, 2011

Layton's death shows Canada's hunger for politicians who inspire

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From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Public's estrangement from elected officials has evidently not reached a point of no return

All the available information, the numbers and research and chatter, tells us that we care less and less about them. That we don't trust them. That they are generally considered among the lowest forms of human life.

Then one of them dies, and we go into a state of national mourning.

A cynic would say that we only love our politicians when they're gone - and even then, only when they've left us in heartbreaking and terrifying ways that remind us of human frailties. But in the spirit of optimism, which seems fitting given Jack Layton's much-quoted final words, it's possible to see something else in his posthumous status as a hero. Perhaps we're not really so inclined to look down on our politicians; perhaps we're eager to look up to them, to like and occasionally even love them, if only they'll give us the chance.

"It gives politicians something to which they can aspire," says pollster Greg Lyle, who has worked alongside several political leaders as a staffer. "Mr. Layton did not spring fully formed into Canadians' hearts. He had to work for it."

The heartbreaking manner in which he worked for it this year was unique, and hopefully will remain that way. It is wrenching to think of the arc of his final campaign, in which he seemed to be recovering from cancer, the epitome of a man fighting through his pain. And an active politician dying at the very peak of his career, trying to squeeze in every last opportunity to make the most of his fleeting opportunity to lead the Official Opposition, was unlike anything most living Canadians have witnessed.

But the people who gathered en masse this week to say goodbye - not just in Ottawa and his hometown of Toronto, but in Vancouver and Edmonton and Montreal as well - didn't seem to be thinking just of how Mr. Layton left them. They seemed also to be thankful for the traits that preceded his illness - the evident compassion for people, the relentless work ethic, the eagerness to work with others, the unshakable optimism, and the fact that he rarely seemed to be putting on any kind of act.

While it may have taken his death to bring all these attributes into sharper focus (and to cause some of his more grating characteristics, including his penchant for self-promotion, to be overlooked), the fact that he consistently polled as the most personally popular of the federal leaders suggests that at some level they always resonated. And what stands out, when you stop and think about it, is how unremarkable these supposedly remarkable qualities were - how little they went beyond what should be expected of the men and women who enter public life.

As Mr. Lyle alluded to, Mr. Layton was not a once-in-a-lifetime politician - a John F. Kennedy or a Pierre Trudeau or a Barack Obama - blessed with overpowering charisma. He did not captivate the country with his policy ideas; even many people who voted for his party in this year's election would be hard-pressed to identify the promises in its platform. A career politician, he didn't even have an especially compelling back story. He was just "Bon Jack" - a

people person who seemed to be in public life for the right reasons, was passionate about his beliefs and values, and didn't seem to be hiding anything.

It should be humbling to his contemporaries that this was enough to make many Canadians acutely feel a void as soon as he was gone. Because without taking anything away from Mr. Layton's considerable charm, he stood out largely because of who he was up against. Opponents such as Prime Minister Stephen Harper and former Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff have focused disproportionately on the failings of others, rather than what they themselves have to offer; and when they have tried to endear themselves to us, it's often been through ham-handed attempts to show a common touch. Next to them, Mr. Layton's basic humanity gave us something to admire.

But those who still have hope of reaching greater heights in public life, or enter it from this point forward, should find some relief in Canadians' reaction this week. The public's estrangement from elected officials has evidently not reached a point of no return, past which we're unable to see them in a different light. If they work hard to earn our trust, we just might let them.

"What all of this shows is that there is still a public hunger for leaders that people can believe in," says John Duffy, the author and Liberal strategist. "That genuine popularity is actually available to a politician if the circumstances and personality can satisfy that hunger."

What we will never know, sadly, is whether Mr. Layton could have sustained that trust. Had he ever gotten a chance to lead a government, those he inspired might have wound up disillusioned. Even if he had been able to return to the House of Commons this fall, it might not have been long before he disappointed admirers with the way he made use of his long-coveted role leading the opposition.

Short of leaving us the way Mr. Layton did, it's very hard for our politicians to exit gracefully. Their own accumulation of mistakes, the impossibility of pleasing everyone, the limitations of government to fix all the world's problems conspire to make us grow weary of them.

The optimists among us might wonder if, long after Mr. Layton has been laid to rest, politicians and the people who elect them might keep what happened this week in the backs of their minds. It needn't be a relationship of unquestioning loyalty and admiration; far from it. But it's not too late to save it from perpetual mistrust and resentment. If both sides are willing to treat politics like a noble calling, it just might become one again.

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