

# Aggressive rhetoric from politicians at all levels may show more style than substance

*Lois Nantais - April 2024*

A favourite adage I use in the classroom is “a lion doesn’t need to tell others they are a lion.” To be a leader is one thing; to be a great leader is another step beyond. With ethical leadership, the kind of leadership that produces the greatest results, the goals are to minimize harm for stakeholders, work for the greatest good, and be cognizant of how one’s leadership decisions create a ripple effect. Last week, I had a slide up listing some of the qualities of personal accountability in an ethical leadership context. Qualities include developing those for which you are responsible, accepting blame when it will shield your team from harm, and giving credit to the team for the progress made. This kind of leadership attitude is common in places like the sport’s world, but it is often hard to find in other spaces. In our political system, where politicians rely on a popular vote, can you imagine if politicians held this level of accountability?

My brother doesn’t remember this, but he taught me a jujitsu move as a general form of protection for me. I was nine at the time and he taught me to hold weight with my hip and then flip someone twice my size over my shoulder. I practiced a lot with him and had fun feeling tough. This memory’s importance is much larger than my brother’s intent, whether he knew it or not, because it gave me permission to defend myself when necessary. Self-permission to defend assumes there is an implicit value worth protecting. I’ve needed that self-protection many times in my life since and am grateful for that lesson.

When I first began to invite Mayor Mike into one of my courses on poverty awareness, the welcome was tumultuous and the questions for him chaotic. I realized that many of the students did not understand the differences in mandate between levels of government, how the democratic process worked at each level, or what type of change or responsibilities were possible for politicians at each of those levels. Many just seemed to believe that social problems or a lack of positive changes in the community were the fault of the mayor. I worked to build more political knowledge into discourse before he visited over the years and as I did, the questions became more thoughtful and less hostile, and the time he spent with us was far more productive.

Many people – certainly not just students - are frustrated at the current socio-economic climate in communities and across the nation. Often that frustration comes out with impatience with bureaucratic process, intolerance for complexity, and anger all directed at politicians. I find that people who talk over politicians, who try to speak for them, and who make assumptions without asking questions, are more interested in emotional self-expression than they are in thoughtful dialogue. Those who spit cherry-picked facts at me with the hostility of a honey badger have usually been taking in the epideictic or blame-shifting rhetoric common to American Republicans and Canadian Conservative politics.

I respect Mayor Mike for arriving to my classes to face students no matter the political climate. I tend to use that choice, visiting classrooms where open dialogue and critical thinking is present, as a sort of barometer for political capability. It’s a far different climate from photo ops in restaurants or with structured political speeches because it demands more personal accountability. Every front line or service-centered employee who works with people regularly knows that an ego is a detriment on the job when fielding angry questions from the public.

I’m not running for candidacy in the next federal election. I have a demanding job as an educator, and I’m often distracted from politics by commitment to the important work I do in the classroom. When people demand I answer their political accusations in the middle of a grocery store or a restaurant after a long day at work, or when I cannot get my hair cut without being taunted by someone who’s level of self-righteousness is breathtakingly out of line with the accuracy of their facts, it is enough for me. We often speak about how women in politics experience more aggression than men. From personal experience, I believe it’s true and I am not known for my reticence in the political arena. During the 2021 federal election when I ran, an anonymous man posted a video of himself in his tool shed, speaking to the tools he’d like to use on me.

I’m going to let history show me if there is any substance to Pierre Poilievre beyond his bullying rhetoric and I say the same for politicians like Bill Dennis. For those who purposely use aggressive rhetoric in their political strategy to gain popularity and momentum, it is not their physical presence that’s the problem – it’s the environment they create with their leadership style. That

might seem all well and good for them at the time, when they feel like they are winning, but not so great when they find themselves flat out on a mat of their own making where mercy is hard to come by.