

# THE CONSUMER MODEL OF POLITICS — A BAD IDEA

Susan Delacourt and Don Lenihan

Canada's democratic system has increasingly been organized around the idea that citizens are consumers. But while that approach makes politicians more mindful of the voters' wallets, it's not clear that it is the best way to promote democracy or the complex art of governance. There is a better way, argue Susan Delacourt and Don Lenihan. It's called public engagement, and it sees the citizens as something more than mere shoppers.

Le régime démocratique canadien s'articule de plus en plus autour de la notion de citoyens-consommateurs. Cette approche consumériste incite la classe politique à s'intéresser au portefeuille des électeurs, mais elle n'est sans doute pas le meilleur moyen de promouvoir la démocratie et l'art complexe de la gouvernance. Il faudra cesser de considérer les citoyens comme de simples acheteurs, écrivent Susan Delacourt et Don Lenihan, et ils préconisent plutôt la voie de l'engagement et de la participation des citoyens aux processus politiques.



**W**hen Rob Ford won the mayoralty election in Toronto on the night of October 26, 2010, his victory speech was an enthusiastic thanks to the clever voter-shoppers of Toronto. They had, Ford said, chosen the politician who was going to put their money where his mouth was.

"Toronto now is open for business, ladies and gentlemen," Ford declared immediately as he took the stage, flanked by his family and supporters. "This victory is a clear call from the taxpayers: 'Enough is enough and I want respect,'" he said, praising the citizens of Toronto for uniting behind one "burning desire" over all others: "They want value for their dollar." And, of course, Ford couldn't let this historic moment go by without using his signature phrase from the campaign: "We focused on watching taxpayers' money and we're going to put an end to the gravy train."

Ford's victory in Toronto has been attributed to various rising trends in politics as we approach 2011: the triumph of the long-suffering Tim Hortons voters in the suburbs; or, if you like, an echo of the US Tea Party in Canada's largest city. Ford, for his part, would probably call it the anti-gravy revolt.

Coffee, tea or gravy — whatever the hot liquid, it is now, in 2010, a shorthand for voter rejection of the "elite" status quo in Canada and the United States. What flows through all these descriptions is the idea that citizens, above all else, are voting as consumers first. People want the same thing from their governments and politicians that they

receive when they go to the mall: a fair transaction; something to show for the trust or support they've invested in the elected representative.

Nik Nanos' polling through 2010 helps shed some light on this. He concludes that the disconnect between voters and perceived "out of touch" politicians is now one of the animating forces of Canadian politics. In our view, one response has been to treat the voters as consumers. Ford is a case in point.

Some might argue that's a fine thing. What could be wrong with a system in which the citizens — no, let's call them "taxpayers" — are looking out for their dollars, and the politicians or governments — let's call them "service providers" — are competing with one another to offer them the best deal? Nothing is wrong with this. Everyone agrees that taxpayers should get value for money. The real question is whether that is all citizens want from their governments. Or, to put this differently, are they content to see government as little more than a mall or a donut shop?

We think not, and that, as a result, politicians need a better way to address the disconnect, one that doesn't reduce governance to a simple set of consumer transactions. What would such an alternative look like?

**F**irst, let's trace the origins of the trend to treat voters as shoppers. While there are many reasons why Canada, like other industrial democracies, has begun to view politics and citizenship through the lens of consumerism, the origins seem to lie in the rise of the modern economy after the

Second World War. It was built on a spectacular surge in the buying power of citizens. This, in turn, elevated individuals' new status as consumers to something akin to their traditional status as citizens. The effect on politics has been profound.

Where once politics was seen as a public service, similar to the military (hence “campaigns” and “troops”) or education or religion (the speeches delivered as lectures or sermons), increasingly it was and is seen as a business whose customers are the citizens. In this view, politics is subject to the same rules as the market, complete with its own forms of marketing, slogans and salesmanship.

For example, governments began to measure their own success through key market trends, such as consumer confidence and the willingness of citizens to turn over their hard-earned money to the people who create the trade, jobs and stuff that keep the country afloat.

Similarly, the rise of consumer-citizenship ushered in new market-based ways of thinking about accountability, such as contracts or guarantees, which are now standard fare in politics. As Ford declared in his victory speech: “Four years from tonight, you'll look back and say Rob Ford did exactly what he said he was going to do.” This is neither new nor unusual. It's remarkably similar to the words that Jean Chrétien used when he unveiled his famous Red Book of campaign promises in 1993, the rhetoric around the Republicans' “Contract with America” in 1994 and Mike Harris' Common Sense Revolution in Ontario in 1995.

In many ways, viewing politics through the lens of business has been helpful and even enlightening, but we may be in danger of taking it too far. Indeed, we may be in danger of undermining one of our most important political institutions: political parties.

For most of our history, mainstream political parties in Canada have seen themselves as big policy machines. They were the primary vehicle for working out the give-and-take for the ideas to solve big issues and unite the public around common goals and disparate views. While this task has always been difficult, now it is especially so. Today, Canadians are culturally and ethnically more diverse, less rooted in communities and more mobile. Globalization has brought new commitments and obligations. The Internet connects people and organizations in innovative ways, often beyond traditional borders. And, finally, Canadians are more educated and informed and correspondingly less willing to defer to leaders who broker backroom deals.

In this complex new environment, it's very difficult to get people to agree on big policy ideas. But it's equally hard to see how treating them as consumers will help. “The customer is always right,” citizens are told when they're shopping. They expect this attitude from their politicians too — don't tell me I'm wrong, tell me what you're going to do for me in exchange

going in the other direction. They are taking yet another page from the consumer book and now tend to look at the Canadian population in market segments, as the manufacturers or distributors increasingly do: one product for one type of person, a modified one for another.

Carleton University communications professor André Turcotte has written on this development within Stephen Harper's Conservative Party. Instead of trying to unite diverse groups around an overarching set of policies for all Canadians, it has tailored its policies and promises to segments of the electorate that can tilt the balance toward Conservative seats in key ridings or regions. “Traditionally, Liberal and Conservative campaigns have adopted a mass-marketing approach to winning elections,” Turcotte wrote in a paper delivered in the spring of 2010 at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Montreal. “The approach adopted by the Harper Conservatives can be described as ‘hyper-segmentation.’”

The problem with this approach is that the voter-politician transaction apparently has to be a simple one, easy

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for my support. In short, the consumer model encourages dissent rather than cooperation, intransigence rather than compromise.

Facing this array of obstacles, political parties seem increasingly reluctant to propose big ideas, especially at the federal level. It's easier to talk about shared *value* — “watching the taxpayers' money” — than shared *values*. Indeed, parties appear to be

to promise and easy to deliver. Consider the Conservative Party's five priorities in the 2006 election campaign. They had some success with pitching and delivering on most of the consumer-friendly promises: cutting the GST, cashback offers to parents for child care, accountability (money-back) guarantees on integrity and fighting crime (protect your home, family and stuff). But consider that fifth, more

complicated promise: to reduce medical wait times with the health care guarantee borrowed from Michael Kirby's landmark Senate report.

Once in power, "Canada's New Government," as it styled itself — new and improved, just like the supermarket products — quickly realized that it needed the support of provincial governments, professional associations and hospitals if it wanted to improve wait times. Some of these parties turned out to have a different view of the issue and its solution. As a result, progress was slow and, after a series of disappointing starts, the issue was quietly dropped from the government's agenda. The initiative failed because the government had no authority to compel the others to change, nor did it have an effective plan to persuade them to do so.

So is that the lesson to be drawn? That politicians should offer only consumer-friendly promises that one government, acting alone, can deliver? If so, this is worrying. Health care, for example, may well have disappeared from the federal political debate because it isn't an issue that could be solved with simple, voter-consumer solutions. Do we really want a view of politics that buries an issue because it's complex?

There is an alternative. What if politicians and government acknowledged that we now live in a multistakeholder environment, where real solutions often require high levels of collaboration across organizational boundaries? What if they were elected on the promise to bridge these boundaries, and work through them? The private sector has made real strides here. Collaboration and networking are already successful strategies in business.

Still, the situation is more complicated for political parties. In the days when voters looked to political parties to broker ideas, not just sell them poli-

cy merchandise, politicians had to campaign on core values. Thus Liberals might focus on ways to promote greater equality of opportunity, say, through medicare or regional economic development, while Conservatives might focus on policies that support smaller government, such as tax cuts. Brokering big ideas requires give-and-take on the part of different groups, which can raise awkward questions about a party's "real values," expose rifts and factions within it, or alienate potential supporters if it is trying to court — all of which, in turn, can compromise its chances of winning. As a result, political parties have always had to walk a careful line between chasing big ideas and winning elections — between doing what they believe is right, and doing what is expedient. Good leaders know that the goal

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of uniting the population behind big initiatives is the lifeblood that flows through political parties and instills in their members a sense of purpose. Without it, there is no real mission. However, in an increasingly fast-moving, complex, consumer-oriented world, party leaders are increasingly reluctant to go this route. The consumer approach looks a lot easier.

Consumerism is attractive to party strategists precisely because it sees politics and parties differently. It does not aim at building coalitions around values, big ideas and causes. It is not about taking people somewhere, but about

finding out what they already want, and then giving it to them. In fact, the consumer model sees big initiatives as a liability, not an asset. They require huge investments of effort, resources and political capital for what are increasingly seen as low and risky returns. This is especially acute in minority governments, when an election could happen anytime, and within a fragmented electorate. Why, then, would a party choose the hard path to victory when an easier, less risky one is available?

Even this is not the whole picture. If traditional politics requires that parties strike a balance between pursuing goals and winning — between what is right and what is expedient — it nevertheless holds that, in the end, ideas, values and causes are why parties exist.

Winning may be important, but it is a means to the end, not the end.

Not so for the consumer approach. Consumer politics is a whole different way of doing — and seeing — politics. In this view, winning is the primary goal. It's the ultimate transaction. It is also the litmus test of what is the "right" thing to do because winning signals that a party has given the public what it wants — and that is the ultimate aim of consumer politics.

This takes us back to Ford, or the US Tea Party, for that matter. Both were hailed in the fall of 2010 for their ability to harness the emotions and anger of the electorate and use them for electoral ends. We can now see why. The consumer approach is a powerful tool for channelling anger (or other disruptive emotions), not only because it promises people something they want, but because it makes them feel *they are right to want it*.

This may be a good way to win elections, but it is a bad way to govern. Where such emotions are at issue, it only stokes the flames. Rob Ford's new job as mayor of Toronto, for instance, is going to require that he also deal



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Toronto's victorious mayoralty candidate Rob Ford greets his supporters at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. Susan Delacourt and Don Lenihan write that Ford represents a new wave of consumer politics, which they don't think is a good thing for the public policy process.

with people who have never had the pleasure of riding the gravy train. Managing Canada's largest city is going to require brokerage and getting a handle on complexity among voters whose lives revolve around more than just shopping and consuming.

Good governance, in other words, is about more than satisfying wants and winning elections. Big issues like poverty or low productivity growth are threatening and real. Effective responses require effective plans. But such plans are more than packages of micropolicies, based on public opinion research. They are sets of ideas, values and tasks that have been vetted, test-

ed, organized and integrated around a goal. However, in an increasingly interdependent world, such plans can be implemented only with the collaboration of other stakeholders, communities and ordinary citizens. Government can't do the job alone, but if it wants real success, it should be challenging the public to see politics as a way to work together to find solutions to big issues, not just as a tool to satisfy personal wants.

Such solutions will not come through the consumer model. Rather, they require a fundamental rethinking of the public policy process as we have known it. Happily, such an alternative

is emerging. It responds to both complexity and the short-comings of the consumer approach by changing the public policy process to make it more open, inclusive, transparent, accountable and "bottom-up" or collaborative. In effect, it rewards governments, stakeholders, communities and ordinary citizens for working together to find shared solutions to complex issues. It's called public engagement because it is designed to enlist the public more directly in the task of developing solutions to complex issues, multistakeholder issues.

Government is a full participant in this process, not just an observer. It

seeks to work with citizens to help them resolve issues. Therefore it must be flexible in its approach and willing to consider new ways to do things, as citizens come up with new solutions. By getting government to commit to actions, the process links the dialogue directly to decision-making. By getting

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stakeholders and/or citizens to commit to actions, it invests them with a sense of ownership and responsibility for solutions. The goal is to build a real partnership through real collaboration. Finally, this is an iterative process, which, over time, will lead to a robust and effective partnership between governments, stakeholders and citizens. (For a full discussion of this approach to public engagement, see *Rethinking the Public Policy Process: A Public Engagement Framework*, at: <http://www.ppforum.ca/search/results/Rethinking%20the%20Public%20policy%20process>.)

The traditional public policy process falls far short of this. It aims at little more than getting citizens and stakeholders to provide feedback to government. It then falls to government to do the deliberative work and to decide how to act on the results. Rather than building a true partnership, this only reinforces the view that government is the primary owner of the problem, and the primary problem solver.

Public engagement is thus a far cry from the simple consumer-citizen, one-off, transactional approach to politics and governance. It is closer to the idea of responsible government and conscientious citizenry, still worthy goals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we'd argue. But people may well ask: is this just a pipe dream,

especially in a system that rewards simple solutions and the politicians who sell them to the voter-consumers?

In October 2008, New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham announced his government's Poverty Reduction Initiative. The goal, he said, was to transform how the province deals

with poverty. Graham went on to explain that poverty is a "complex" issue, that is, it can't be solved by government alone. Everyone has a role to play. In keeping with this, the task he set himself was to develop an antipoverty strategy that was jointly owned by government, stakeholders and the general public, and to use a public engagement process to achieve this.

The poverty reduction process had three stages, each of which involved a different subset of "the public." The third and final stage was held in November 2009, and was facilitated

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personally by Premier Graham. Fifty senior decision-makers came together from government, business and the voluntary sector to debate a series of options that had been developed in Stages I and II by citizens and experts. Together these decision-makers adopted the first-ever poverty reduction plan for the province, which commits all the participants to a comprehensive and ambitious plan to reduce poverty.

The new premier of New Brunswick, David Alward, participated

in this process, has fully endorsed it and has made himself minister responsible for public engagement in his own government, which is supporting a major new process on learning. Elsewhere, the government of Nunavut has launched its own poverty reduction process. The government of Australia is planning a major initiative on health. Other provinces and municipalities across Canada are also gearing up. Who knows? Maybe even Rob Ford's Toronto may consider this approach, once the gravy train makes its last station stop in the Greater Toronto Area.

In conclusion, we think Canadians are fast approaching a fork in the political road. Political parties and citizens will have to decide which way they want to go. One path takes us deeper into the technocratic world of political marketing and consumer politics. The other aims at a renewal of the role of ideas, values and participation in politics through a more collaborative kind of public policy process. The path Canadians choose will be an answer to the question of what it is to be a citizen in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century — are we

just shoppers, or do we aspire to something more?

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