

THE EFFECT OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS ON THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Democracy At Twilight wish to share with you insights and quotes we have adapted from a paper by French Media Analyst – Jean Baudrillard. This material confirms what we have long believed about the corruptive effect that public opinion polls have on democracy.

If you have never done a study of this phenomenon of polls, we hope this will get you curious enough to do your own research.

There are two ways to look at the effect of Public Opinion Polling upon the conduct of Elections. One is that the Pollsters and the Media who choose which ones to quote are addicted by the power and ability to manipulate the masses in the direction they want them to go. The other is that the masses themselves, seek a diversion from the hardships of living life by their own will and desires and call upon the media to provide them with illusive showmanship, by which personal responsibility in life can be divested or forgotten.

First of all, the question we should ask is what exactly is the mass media giving to us, and what if anything can we give back to it? Is the media in fact, speech without response. What if the media's actual modern day effect was to manufacture non-communication? If one accepts the definition that communication as an exchange, the giving and receiving of information, that in which the responsibility of each party is called on.

Many of us have had the opportunity of writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper thinking perhaps that we can educate the Paper and it's readers in another point of view. But how often do the letters which contradict the paper's stance actually get printed in a form long enough to make a point. And how often do we feel that our opinion actually changed the viewpoint of the paper?

Media trained in the new journalism of advocacy has perhaps interviewed some of us. We were often shocked at how our words were altered, put into false context, or altogether

eliminated. Where is the two way communication here?

In fact most media in our age forbids a response, thus rendered the process of exchange impossible.

The facts are brutal: Power in a society can be hijacked by him who gives, and to whom no return can be made. It is a monopoly designed to profit one side, and it throws the social process out of balance.

The restoration of the possibility of response entails upsetting the whole present structure. And it will be resisted firmly. But is it just a forced silence on the masses? As already mentioned the possibility exists, that the public satisfied with bread and circuses do not wish to disturb that imbalance. There could be a willing servitude to such domination.

Let's look at the subject of public opinion polls, which are in themselves mass mediums and are made to be news in and of themselves. In this last election we had various polling agencies participate such as Ipsos – Reid and Leger Marketing. Their influence in the election was profound and definitive. The opinion polls supposedly produce answers to our questions and induce future behavior.

Democracy At Twilight would submit to you that they are a major instrument in the manipulation of our democracies, especially during an election. But are the opinion polls acting in the place of a public space or are they hidden behind the screen? Before the polling began, many people had distinct ideas on who they were likely to support for mayor.

But with the progressive publishing of the opinion polls, that perception was thrown into a stupor. Instead, a radical uncertainty as to our own desire, our own choice, our own opinion, our own will was engendered. Suddenly confusion of what we have seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears from others dominates. For a substitute, the perception of the poll and its declaration that 50% are undecided, etc, etc.... is added the sorting of the viable candidates from the so called doomed fringe is introduced.

From that point onwards, it seems to many to be illegitimate or just plain ignorant to contradict what the poll has proclaimed.

The issue here is the emergence of a *completely new species of uncertainty*, which results not from a lack of information, but

from the information itself or even an excess of information. And tellingly invites no real response. Being invited into this uncertainty we fall into the pattern of *not knowing who we are unless it is verified* by the statistics of the pollster.

This places an enormous burden of trust on the Huckster...err umm..... Pollster. Helpful to this is the willful acceptance of naivete by those reading the polls.

Who exactly are these pollsters? What do we know of them apart from what the media who favor their selective quotation, has told us about them? What was the exact form of the question asked to 500 people. Was the choice of people in fact random or selective? Were the results obtained from the original poll the same results that were finally published. Which opinion polls taken, never see the light of day and why do they not? Are the pollsters ever subject to intimidation, bribery by an outside interest, or just plain personal bias? These are questions that should be asked.

What measure by the Province in the Local Authorities Election Act should be there about the use or non-use of polls in an election? In fact, in the Federal Election Act, the publishing of polls are forbidden for 72 hours before the vote closes. What did the Electoral Reform Commission of the early 1990's perceive in a limited way, that the Provincial Election Act and the Local Authorities Election Act do not?

A society run by public opinion polls is a sort of continual voyeurism of the group in relation to itself; it must know at all times what it wants, know what it thinks... a sort of decisional hypochondria.

In this state true social conversation ceases, the two phenomena actually fit together, the masses have no opinion of their own, and the media does not truly inform them. By simulation and uncertain the political arena as a public space is effectively destroyed. Unconsciously, pleasure can be derived from the symbolic murder of the political class, by throwing all real individual perceptions into uncertainty. It can be indulged in as a game of malicious foretelling, a total game of chance and unpredictability.

This is why elections are so emotionally draining on the public. All sense of stability is continually plucked out from underneath our noses by the next poll. Many choose to drop out

of the voting altogether, their emotional energy long since spent on elections of the past. Others struggle on in our democratic duty, with a sigh of resignation.

If opinion polling of an election was designed as a direct manipulation, what would be the most effective strategy? Maybe what happened in this last election for Calgary's Mayor is instructive.

First the person the pollster or selecting Media wants to defeat, is given a poll designed to give that person an early commanding lead.

Then mid way through the campaign a second selected poll is published showing another lesser favored candidate coming up and splitting the vote of the early leader.

Then about five days before the vote, a startling poll is produced for the favored candidate, show a candidate pulling up suddenly from the back of the pack to place themselves in a virtual tie with the former front-runners.

I wonder if some of you have seen the movie now in the theatres called Secretariat. It is the story of the racehorse in 1973, who won for the first time in 25 years the US Triple Crown. This horse as portrayed in the movie, ran the first half of races in dead last position then would suddenly pull up past all the others to take the lead and win. It is a wonderfully inspiring story and shows in us the natural excitement of seeing the underdog winning out.

This dramatic device is used in all sorts of theatre as well, and I suggest a dramatic comeback from behind can excite people in a political arena just as much. The question to ask is did it happen naturally, or has it been contrived?

Moral law, which God says is written in our hearts – has a decree: To know yourself, to know our own will and desire. We can only do this by submission to God, for he has also told us, "The heart of man is desperately wicked, who can know it?"

Compassion urges us to enlighten the superstitions of the masses by revealing all trickery. But the mass must co-operate by owning up to the responsibility that inevitability comes when they are un-tricked.

So the masses can back away from a massive devolution of exercising their will, of trusting the pollsters to take care of this duty. Or will they prefer to continue to delegate responsibility

for their own desires to someone else? Beau Brummel an English Fashion designer in England was reported to have taken five hours to dress himself in the morning. He had a servant for just that problem of indecision. Before a splendid landscape dotted with beautiful lakes, he turned to his valet to ask him: Which lake do I prefer? The masses can in fact be very snobbish, acting as Brummel did. Delegating in a sovereign manner, the faculty of choice to someone else by a sort of game of irresponsibility. A game of ironic challenge, of sovereign lack of will, of secret ruse.

So what is it? The medusa Media that fascinate and manipulate the masses? Or the Media dancing to the bidding of the masses in hiding the truth. Or is it both?

What happened Monday night, September 18th, 2010 in Calgary? The night when the full outworking of the opinion polls manifested itself? We believe my dear Watson, that something was afoot.

It is for this reason, that Democracy At Twilight believe that Albertans must petition Premier Ed Stelmach, to call a Public Inquiry regarding the Local Authorities Election Act and the Alberta Election Act. An Inquiry to examine the use or abuse of Public Opinion Polls and the Effect of Social Media, upon all election periods under their jurisdiction.