

Today's politicians could use a Plato tutorial

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Many Canadians have expressed concern about how politicians conduct themselves as they go about the important task of being our leaders. In the past few months, our news media have devoted space and effort to inform citizens of the short comings of a grand sweep of political figures. These cover a range of leaders from city councilors and mayors to provincial members of parliament, including some of our present and past provincial premiers. Included as well, are federal members of parliament, cabinet ministers, and some present and past prime ministers. But the list goes on to include prime ministerial appointees at high levels. Also included are some of our senators (unelected) who may not be able to resist the privileges of entitlement and unaccountability. These senators hide behind the security that comes from knowing that there is presently no efficient legal way for them to be relieved of their duties.

When I talk with ordinary Canadian citizens about our political miscreants, those who show interest have a fairly consistent reply. They express feelings of disappointment and sadness, and above all, they agree that what is lacking more than anything else is that our wayward leaders have lost their ethical compasses. They have lost the interest and moral strength to know the difference between opportunism and stealing, between right and wrong, between serving as leaders and serving themselves at the trough of greed. They have lost the ethical vision to elevate their political profession to a level where the public sees them as leaders showing statesmanship and true concern for the welfare of all Canadians. They have dragged Canadians down by their unscrupulous exploitation of the positions of power and responsibility they have been given.

As a former educator I have had the privilege of visiting in many schools and many classrooms. One of the pieces of ethical advice I have noticed in many Roman Catholic schools is a set of initials posted prominently at the front of classes that reads "WWJD". Almost all students know that these letters mean "What Would Jesus Do?" I sometimes wonder if it may be of similar help to politicians to have the letters WWPDP prominently posted at the front of their council chambers or their houses of parliament. In this case, the letters would mean "What Would Plato Do"? Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher from 2400 years ago, devoted much of his life to thinking about what are the qualities of a good leader

and what systems of government would work well for his pre-democratic time in Greece around 380 years B.C. His ideas are written in his work, *The Republic*.

Following are a few of Plato's ideas that, while not perfect, may serve as a guide to our present Canadian politicians:

- * Leaders should set higher ethical standards for themselves than for the citizens they serve.
- * Political leaders should be chosen from among our wisest citizens.
- * The more thought leaders devote to the things that would be good for all citizens, the wiser they will become.
- * The only leaders to be given power should be those who do not love power.
- * It is a good idea for leaders to be changed frequently since long periods of power may lead to corruption.
- * Leaders should not be people of great wealth, for they may be tempted to become even wealthier.
- * Leaders should not own a lot of property, and during their leadership their property should not exchange hands.
- * Leaders should be rational and be true lovers of wisdom.
- * Leaders should not hide under the guise of privacy. What they do should be open to public scrutiny.
- * Our leaders' motto should be "service to others."

Of course, Plato lived in pre-democratic times, and some of his critics, like Karl Popper, in the late 1960's, criticized Plato's *Republic* because his ideas had elements of elitism. Like many good ideas, they can be misunderstood in the light of our present system. Nonetheless, I wonder how many of the present practices of our leaders, now under fire from news media, might benefit by taking a second look at "What Would Plato Do"?