

POLITICS AS USUAL: Rules? What rules?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

I have come to the depressing conclusion that rules don't matter anymore.

Or, more accurately, there don't appear to be any rules any more. Not in what passes for acceptable speech, acceptable leadership, acceptable standards of behaviour. And not in what passes for what any of that even means anymore. Trump anyone?

What is a rule? And why bother following it?

Being outrageous, bucking the 'system?', flouting the 'rules?' is celebrated 'with adulation and the monetary compensation that goes with it. We are at the point now that even the most egregious breaches of accepted norms are met, not with shame-faced mea culpas, but with the jutted chins of the defiant.

The unmistakable message is that rules are for chumps.

And there are two arenas where this is most evident 'sports and politics.

In sports, as in politics, to be the best and to win are clearly not the same thing. Being the best means working hard towards a goal. Winning means doing anything it takes to reach that goal. Time and again we have seen that the best does not always win. The dopers get the gold and the clean athletes go home with participation ribbons. Yes, the cheaters are always exposed in the end, but so what? The damage has been done. Today, in sports, everything has an asterisk.

I call it the Lance Armstrong effect.

I love cycling. Renting a caravan and following the Tour-de-France in Europe is on my bucket list.

But Lance Armstrong killed that dream for me, for a little while. I was one of those chumps who refused to believe he was cheating. I believed his lies that the folks who sought to expose his near decade of doping were just sore losers.

As a cancer survivor myself, the idea that he was drugging himself to win just did not compute to me. I mean, how could it? How could someone who came back from literally the brink of death, risk it all with drugs just to win the Maillot Jaune? I believed him when he said he was clean. And I was devastated when he finally admitted that it was all a big lie.

The impact of the lie is long-lasting. Now, when I watch the Tour-de-France, I do so with measure of skepticism. When I see a rider attack a 'hors categorie' climb, and he flies past other riders, legs furiously pumping like out-of-control pistons, I am still thrilled, but I also can't help think, is he doping? Will this miraculous ride be shown to be a fraud tomorrow?

Winning at all costs is a fallacy. There is always a cost. And that cost is a collective lack of belief.

The same holds true in politics. From E-health, to gas plants, to in/out schemes, to Senate shenanigans 'folks have become somewhat inured to scandal. Voters are disengaged, failing to even participate in, let alone pay attention to the democratic process. In this age of 24 hour, multi-media news, real issues are forced to compete with the noise of manufactured outrage of partisan politics. Legitimate concerns with political policy are lumped in or given false equivalence with the unhinged online rantings of the perpetually aggrieved. It's at a point now that folks can no longer tell what is actually a scandal and what is the made up nonsense of folks just trying to stir the pot.

Which is exactly my point: the rules don't matter because no one believes anyone plays by them anymore anyway.

The ho-hum response of the public to headlines about controversy over the recent federal Conservative leadership contest is a prime example. Reports have come out that there may be a 7,000 vote discrepancy between the unofficial rolls of registered members and those that actually voted.

I can't comment on the merits or lack thereof of the allegations as I am not familiar with the rules of the leadership contest. However, I will comment on the adopted approach to handling the allegations 'and that appears to be to quash them: to label those that question the process as 'sore losers' and move on. 'The election was fair and the results stand?'. End of story. Move along.

From a purely political strategy perspective, I get it. Media coverage of allegations of vote tampering generates stories that have legs. And investigations of allegations of vote tampering, investigations that would likely take months, are the kinds of stories that provide a steady drip drip drip of negative news. This is not something a party wants as an election looms. As Clinton can well attest.

So, it makes sense to try to kill the story.

But from a sense of fair play, it does not. There are rules. Everyone is supposed to play by the same rules.

If there is an allegation that rules have been broken, then you should have a clear cut, transparent process for dealing with the allegations. And, more important, be seen to follow that process. Then move on. Errors don't become scandals unless you fail to address them.

To pretend that all allegations are nonsense is to belie the importance of having rules in the first place. You can't say you are for law and order, and then abandon your own rules when they don't serve your purpose.

Are some people sore losers? Absolutely. Do some people make crazy allegations in the hopes of discrediting the legitimate winner? Again, absolutely. But that's where a clear and transparent appeal and review process ? rules! ? would come into play. False allegations would be easily dismissed and real allegations would be addressed and rectified.

Rules are not just lines on a page. They give structure to contests and buttress our sense of fairness. Take away the rules and we effectively cede the field to those that seek to win at all costs.

With voter turnout at 60 per cent and falling, it's pretty clear that no one wants to play that game.