

POLITICS AS USUAL: Galileo's Lament

I was reading one of the national newspapers this week and noticed an interesting little historical tidbit. It was one of those "today in history" type columns. On September 20, 1633, Galileo Galilei went before the Inquisition to defend himself against the charge of heresy. His crime? Daring to state that contrary to the state and church sanctioned view of the time, the earth was not the centre of the universe around which other celestial bodies revolved. Rather, as his scientific "observations" demonstrated, the sun was the centre of our universe and the earth and the other planetary objects revolved around it. (To be more accurate, his observations supported or "proved" the Copernican view on the universe). The *Siderius Nuncias* (Starry Messenger) published in 1610 was widely read, though given the literacy rates of the 1600s "widely read" is a rather relative concept. Regardless, it was read by enough critical thinkers to cause a dramatic change in worldview "from geocentric to heliocentric". This was quite an amazing feat when you think about it. Belief that the earth was the immovable centre of the universe was the dominant worldview for well over a thousand years. That it was supplanted by a radically different, virtually polar opposite view, in less than 20 years, is simply extraordinary. And all due to a rather unassuming publication, by a rather unassuming fellow. Galileo did not have a happy ending to his intellectual pursuits. He was charged with and tried for heresy "the punishment for which was burning at the stake". Forced to recant his position rather than be burned alive, Galileo spent his last days imprisoned in his home. Self-preservation took precedence over principles "but who could blame him given the alternative"? Despite his best efforts, attempting reason with the unreasonable, he soon found that speaking truth to power is a losing battle. He was not the first and certainly not the last to come to that realization. From the "witches" of Salem to the blacklisted folks of McCarthy, there is a long list of people who have learned that reason and logic are irrelevant and the truth will most definitely not set you free. My point, and I do have one, is that all too often what is not popular, what does not support the mainstream views or theories "be it science, politics, medicine or what have you" is disregarded and then discarded usually quite forcefully. Those that dare proffer such contrary positions are most often disgraced as a consequence. If one cannot be proven wrong, then one must be proven wicked. In our post-modern age, where craven self-interest seems paramount, the truth is viewed in shades of grey. Equivocation is the norm. Do the right thing has been replaced by, "Do the right thing, as long as it's the right thing for me." "Speaking truth to power" is a tidy sound bite used by the activist and politician alike. Tell the truth and the powerful will fall, we are told. That's a lovely idea, but, as any whistleblower will tell you, it's rarely that simple. It is often far more likely that those that are speaking the truth will find themselves branded heretics and burned at the stake for their troubles "metaphorically of course". As the treatment of those that uncovered the Ornge, gas plant, sponsorship or veterans affairs fiascos amply demonstrate, we may have come a long way from the middle ages, but clearly not far enough. Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is, after all, Our Town.