POLITICS AS USUAL: Openness and Transparency

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Do you ever feel that our fearless leaders are all speaking the same language, spouting the same words, but not really saying anything because when you get right down to it, none of it makes any sense?

I can say with confidence that you are most assuredly not alone. Much like bureaucratese in the public service sector, politicians use their own vocabulary of consultant-developed, focus-group tested words that give them the ability to talk for hours on end while literally saying nothing of substance at all.

By deftly deploying terms and terminology from their arsenal of banalities, even the lowliest of backbenchers is a master in the high art of exquisite equivocation; that seemingly wondrous ability to answer a question without answering a question; to not tell a lie, but not tell a truth either.

From political pundits to politicians of every ilk, everyone and anyone uses the same lingo, over and over and over, to mind numbing effect. Listen to any stump speech or interview given by any candidate and it will be peppered with the same language that both vaguely promises and vaguely castigates ?something? without ever defining what that ?something? is.

It sounds good, but it is style passing as substance. And we lap it up because there's nothing else to eat.

It's not just the obfuscation though that irks. It's the sledgehammer approach to debate that is most grating. By this I mean the current tactic of the deliberate over-use of a handful of phrases to drive home ? with a nail gun ? whatever point is supposedly being made.

An example?

I watched a recent episode of Power and Politics with a current MP as guest. This NDP talking head used the words, ?partisan? and ?kangaroo court? 12 times in 9 minutes (yes I counted!) in describing the antics of the Board of Internal Economy. Whether or not the criticisms were justified is beside the point. The message was lost ? for me at least ? in the miasma of political-speak.

Each level of government has its own unique lexicon, with varying degrees of absurdity. At the municipal level, things often devolve into the truly silly. Case in point? The current, absolute obsession with the need for ?open and transparent? government.

Everyone promises more ?open and transparent government.? We need greater ?openness and transparency? at the Council table. I used it myself when I was a Councillor ? though more ironically than was recognized at the time.

What does that phrase even mean, I wonder. I seriously doubt those that incessantly spout the ?need? for it even comprehend its meaning. Or care to, frankly.

I must confess that every time I hear someone say it ? and it does seem to be the same folks who use the term ad nauseum ? I can't help but think of the movie The Princess Bride. In the movie, Vizzini uses the term ?inconceivable? at every turn, to which, finally, a quizzical Inigo Montoya says, ?You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.?

It's funny, but it's true.

If, as the strident voices tell us, we need more ?open and transparent? government, does that mean then that what we currently have is closed and opaque? Shuttered and murky? Sealed and cloudy?

Or does its usage have nothing to do with meaning and everything to do with implication?

Bingo! We have a winner! The ?need? for open and transparent government is necessarily premised on the implication that our current government and those that occupy it are somehow not. That they are secretive, or obstructive, or dishonest.

It's a political smear dressed up as a principled stance.

Much like the use of anonymous bogeymen.