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Pledges, promises are omnipresent in politics

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ON WEDNESDAY, Winnipeggers will be going to the polls to elect a new mayor. In the lead-up to election day, it seems we have been subjected to an unending stream of pledges and promises from the candidates, ranging from the ridiculous to the sublime.

According to 20th-century author and political philosopher Hannah Arendt in her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, making promises is one of the two essential human activities that make it possible for people to live together in a mutually beneficial way.

For her, promises gave politics life and made democratic politics possible, many times against formidable odds. Promises were meant to bring some predictability, and therefore some assurances, in the ups and downs of everyday life.

Unfortunately, as we approach this civic election, the pledges being made by many of our candidates create more confusion and uncertainty rather than less.

Campaign promises come in many forms — outright promises for an immediate fix of some perceived problem; promises to address long-standing grievances and wrongs; implied promises made by vacuous statements and slogans; and any combination of the above that suggests voting for the sponsoring candidate will make things better.

Problematically, many promises are based on false premises, presumptions about legal authority and pretences of personal power, quite lacking in logic and any sense of reality. These hardly serve to give us more confidence in those who offer them.

A perfect example is the reaction to a recent poll confirming one of Winnipeggers' most serious long-standing concerns: personal safety downtown. The proposed answers range from defunding and/or restructuring the police to removing the police board and firing the chief, fuelled by the old adage of "getting tough on crime."

To speak about eliminating or reducing crime without taking into account homelessness and housing shortages, substance abuse, poverty and food insecurity, as well as limited public access to services and recreation facilities, seems not only illogical, but also futile.

Further, to talk about responding to those issues without proposing major shifts in social priorities and the corresponding funding through taxation increases for the wealthier population also makes no sense. The idea of those who are better off making small sacrifices for the betterment of the less well off seems to be off the table.

In fact, the reverse seems to prevail, as in the provincial government's touted property tax rebate — people who were not suffering got rebates, resulting in less money for educating the people

who rely on public schools to give their children a leg up.

And in times of rising inflation, it's those people who see even less "money on the kitchen table" with no rebate ever in sight.

Neither do vacuous statements and slogans provide relief. Candidates promise “real change,” “a better Winnipeg,” “a voice for everyone” and getting “Winnipeg back on track” and the like, without any articulation about what they mean or how what is implied might be accomplished.

Others make statements such as “Winnipeggers (or Canadians) are hurting,” insinuating that if they were elected, the hurt — whatever it is — would go away.

Still others make pledges that are not in their authority to keep or their purview to accomplish. For example, the police board definitely does not exist at the pleasure of any mayor; it is a provincial requirement. Furthermore, any mayoral candidate making promises must persuade at least a majority of city councillors in order to take any significant action.

The best and most recent reminder might be the unmet pledges by our outgoing mayor to remove the barriers at Portage and Main.

The reminder to all of us is to think more carefully, dig a little deeper and not fall for simplistic responses to complex issues — these promises are not to be taken at face value. At best, they are expressions of the values and predispositions of the candidates. At worst, they are outright “floating trial balloons” to see if more votes might be forthcoming.

Facing a bombardment of promises, how are we decide who we vote for? This is where political theorists differ, except in a few areas. We tend to vote for those who say what we want to hear, without giving it much further thought. And most of us judge people on their character as much as we do their platforms, and we reelect people not so much for what they accomplish but rather for whether they were open and honest with us.

The reservations about who to vote for are, however, no excuse for not voting. In a democracy, we all share the responsibility for the mayors we get and what they do.

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