

Winnipeg Free Press – Opinion

October 25, 2021

Reimagining real public freedom

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THE Western world is experiencing a crisis of the public. Our increasingly fragmented societies are at risk of losing our sense of a public good, one which began with the ancient Greeks, preceded the idea of “government” and remains foundational to democratic societies.

Over time, the ideal of “the public” evolved (beyond all adult males) to the point where it now entails and includes all peoples in a collective in which every person is acknowledged, has status and is valued. This ideal is now most regularly expressed as the common or greater good, an idea which seems to have lost its moral and political importance in our world.

Governments, religious groups and the media seem to have fallen under a spell of playing to competing private interests.

The Greek public served two purposes, a legacy they left us to this day. The first is that the public is a place where people can display their unique contributions to society — their goodness, their expertise and individual talents — for all to see. The underlying premise is that we need the best of every single person to build and sustain a healthy world.

The second is that the public is a place where people and their actions do, or don’t, pass public scrutiny and judgment. There is an underlying expectation that when people enter the public realm, they bring their best thoughts, behaviours and intentions, and they do so for noble purposes — namely making the world a better place for everyone.

When people enter the public with bad intentions or deceit, the expectation is that the public shining a light on them will cause them shame, making them cease, desist and/or change.

It is this ideal upon which the idea of democratic government is built — government by, with and for the people. It is this ideal of the public which is under increasing siege at the moment, simultaneously placing democracy at risk.

Probably the closest we come to describing a democratic public is a community of communities, made up of people with diverse backgrounds, interests and means talking honestly and openly to each other and coming together for common cause — an idea which seems remote and impossible in today’s fractured world.

Too often, it appears as if extreme and divisive political partisanship, religious-freedom rhetoric, unrestrained social and single-issue media have replaced truth, logic, reasonableness and goodwill, without which the common good cannot be found.

When governments only govern in the interests of their bases, shutting out any opposition, or govern in secrecy, any sense of the public is at risk. Against most evidence, our government claims public services such as education, health care, senior care and the like are unaffordable, and free markets alone will provide desirable citizen protections.

They attempted to pass, or did pass without public input, legislation to limit public participation, worker's rights and certain protests — in the process, shutting out the voices of the very people doing the work and holding the expertise. And they only reluctantly confront the anti-vaxxers and anti-maskers, as if their claims were legitimate.

Right now, more than ever, we need governments that realize, acknowledge and publicly declare that where public and private interest collide and intersect, the public — as in the rule of law — must prevail. In short, the greater public good sometimes calls for private co-operation, even sacrifice.

Others claim religious justifications for breaking the law, resorting to insults, obscenities and even violence in the name of a perverted notion of religious freedom. We need religious leaders to stand up publicly to this vitriol, shamed by its association with hatred and lawlessness. The price of freedom for one is freedom for all.

Many media have also turned against the public good, and the very mediums we need to keep us informed and protected — the press, radio and TV — are being used against us. Before the omnipresence of social media and single-issue media, we counted on various media to make public those matters which needed to pass the public tests of truth, rightness and usefulness, and the media held itself to those same standards.

Those media organizations still attempting to do so appear endangered.

The antidote is public education — educating for the public good. This is more than public schooling for the young; it also means governments, religious groups and the media upholding, proclaiming and protecting the imperative of a healthy public to allow us to live together in safety, mutual gratitude and reciprocity, and harmony. That is real meaningful public freedom.

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