

Searching for common-sense outcomes

Winnipeg Free Press – OP ED

September 14, 2021

NOT much has changed since 1965, when Burt Bacharach and Hal David concluded “What the world needs now is love, sweet love.” But what it also needs more of is just common sense.

Common sense would go a long way toward solving the problems we face. It means considering all the available evidence before making decisions — and it means making decisions, not avoiding them. It means seeing the world as it is, not as we pretend or wish it. It means leaving ideology on the trash heap of history where it belongs, and making practical plans for the future instead of being held hostage by the mistakes of a troubled past.

Specifically, children have just returned to school in the midst of a fourth wave of COVID-19, thanks to the more contagious delta variant. Common sense and the best evidence of medical science predicted this situation in the spring, but the provincial government delayed the obvious response. Once again, June silence was followed by July dither and then August flail, belatedly requiring vaccination before the end of October.

Mask mandates, restrictions on gatherings, and the other things that mitigated previous waves are still slow in returning. Too little, too late was inexcusable in the first wave — how much worse is this response now, in the fourth? We have failed the children of our province and their families, by allowing ideology to trump science, evidence and common sense in making public-health decisions — once again.

Then, to rephrase the old proverb, while you can lead a child to school, you can’t make them think. As I watched the anti-mask, anti-vax, antiscience, anti-evidence protesters blocking access to hospitals, it seemed common sense was clearly on life support. If we want to avoid the QAnonstyle lunacies that befuddle American politics and threaten its democracy and stability, we need to follow the evidence, not invent it.

While following the evidence — driven by science, rather than by ideology — is crucial in managing our response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is even more important when it comes to the rapidly worsening climate crisis. If people can’t accept the need for masks and vaccination, how can we convince them to make the lifestyle choices that a sustainable future requires?

Common sense is critical thinking at its most basic level. As I repeatedly tell my students, don’t just believe what I say — look it up. There is no situation you can’t research for yourself, thanks to the internet, but you need to look beyond the click-bait and self-appointed experts.

While dueling experts can undermine our confidence in common sense, we should focus on the scientific consensus about the human causes of the climate crisis, and then actually do something to change them.

Senior American environmentalist Gus Speth just published *They Knew*, on how the U.S. federal government knowingly fuelled the climate crisis for the past 50 years. There were facts, there was lots of evidence, of what lay ahead if business as usual continued. Some people knew what was going on, but facts were hidden, discounted and ignored to suit the self-interests of those in power.

This is still happening — and for the same reasons. Call it ideology, if you want, or capitalism, if you prefer, but civilization as we know it will end because of selfishness and greed, if common sense keeps being kicked to the curb.

There are many things we could do, if there was the political will and common-sense leadership. Listening to the braying of the participants in the latest party leaders' debate makes it clear that both are in short supply, however, as Canadians head to the polls again in a federal election.

As the last two years have gone, so goes the campaign: the NDP is earnest; the Greens are absent; the Liberals are defensive; and the Conservatives are appeasing the worst instincts of their ideological base.

I am angry that Justin Trudeau smugly called an election two years early, but that is no reason to swipe right for risky Erin O'Toole. Jagmeet Singh is too nice to sell the NDP vision for the future (if they have one), while Annamie Paul's Green Party is headed for self-inflicted oblivion.

But "None of the above" is not a good answer, either. We need a different kind of common-sense politics, at all levels, one that avoids ideology, dodges personality and follows the evidence to make practical decisions for everyone's benefit. Right now, this seems like hunting unicorns.

So, look closely at your local candidates. Pick one who cares and is willing to work, across the irrelevance of party lines and despite the ego of their leader, on common-sense solutions for everyone.

We don't need a political saviour or a one-party future. Instead, to borrow a phrase from local author Shaun Loney, we need someone willing and able to lead "an army of problem solvers."

And that army would be us — all of us.

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