



Cambridge Chamber of Commerce MasterMind Series
Ethics in Politics, Banishing the Hidden Agenda

The Chamber's MasterMind Series brings together a group of members to discuss a specific topic related to business, or the community, in hopes of providing a direction for the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors in terms of advocating for public policies that will benefit businesses.

Objective and Outcome: Ethics is not just a word but a very important concept in the business world. The public in general want businesses to not only acknowledge their errors, but to stand by their mistakes and take ownership of them. There are in fact laws and penalties to ensure this happens, including fines and possibly jail time in some circumstances. However, the same can't be said in our political system. We elect our officials insisting their key responsibility should be good stewards of the public's purse, but should we not also hold them to a higher ethical standard above the rest us? Sadly, we've witnessed time and time again, not just in Canada, but worldwide, politicians and leaders who stretch the truth and blatantly lie. The scandal surrounding the SNC-Lavalin affair that rocked Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's re-election campaign is a perfect example of an abuse of power. When questioned by the media after the story was first published in the Globe & Mail newspaper, Trudeau said: "The accusations in the Globe & Mail today were false." That statement soon proved to be false, raising unsettling questions about a lack of transparency and openness on the part of our elected officials at all levels of government. Therefore, we set out to discuss ways to ensure the people we elect are best suited to receive that honour, ensuring ethics in politics is at the highest level. Our discussion touched on many issues and quickly began to focus on several ideas and concepts which could drastically alter our political system, in the end hopefully encouraging a younger generation to become more involved. The following issues surfaced:

- **The need to dispense with party-based training for new political leaders, especially at the federal level, was recommended as a way to ensure the groundwork can be laid in terms of ensuring they truly understand ethics and knowing right from wrong.**

During the discussion, it was mentioned that not enough training was provided, especially surrounding the subject of ethics and that party politics continue even after the election race has ended, which in turn can lead to compromises. It was recommended that some form of third-party training be mandatory, making it a more even playing field for our new leaders. A point was raised that in any profession or job in the private sector, prior qualifications and resumes are considered when hiring. However, this is not the case in the political realm, including for the top job as Prime Minister.

- **New sets of standards should be developed outside party lines when it comes to ensuring potential candidates ‘measure up’ for the job.**

The issue was raised that when it comes to selecting a potential candidate, political parties focus too much on the ‘winability’ factor of a potential rep, which could open the door to trouble should ‘skeletons’ be found in that representative’s closet. It was mentioned that even if an election campaign has already begun, the party leader has a responsibility to determine if a candidate is viable. However, it was also brought up the ability for virtually anyone to run for a political office is at the core of democracy. As well, it was mentioned that even if the ‘right’ person was selected it is very probable they will also be required to make an unpopular call that others may see as a breach of ethics. (It was suggested that Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer and NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh may have made the same call regarding the SNC-Lavalin situation if they held the reins of power). It was also discussed that the concept of ethics, is not neutral and constantly changes. By definition, what one person deems is ethical another may not.

- **There is a need to overhaul our electoral system to a what would be deemed a ‘fairer’ way of selecting leaders.**

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau insisted during his first election run in 2015 that he would replace our current ‘first-past-the-post system’ with proportional representation. This did not happen. Around the table our participants debated the issue, noting that during the most recent federal and provincial elections, there really was no real centre party anymore which made voting difficult under this system. It was suggested that Trudeau hold a referendum regarding proportional representation and spend the next three years educating voters on what this change could mean. At the local level, the ranked ballot system, similar to what’s already in place in London, Ont., has already received public support in Cambridge and should be explored in time for the next municipal election.

- **Putting term limits in place would be a great method to ensure those holding political office remain focused and accountable.**

During the course of discussion, the point was raised should holding a political office be considered a career or viewed as a public service? It was suggested that many politicians, at all levels, appear to think of it as a career and that getting re-elected seems to be a top priority for them, sidetracking them from what should matter the most. Having set term limits, it was suggested, may help them concentrate on priorities and ensure they don’t lose sight of their mission. The subject of apathy was raised, suggesting that many may not bother to run for office since the ‘same people’ always seem to be re-elected. Perhaps with a set term, this would result in a more even playing field? As well, a discussion also ensued that having term limits could make our politicians more accountable, hopefully preventing incidents happening like the recent five-week shutdown at Queen’s Park during the federal election. It was noted that no pieces of legislation were passed during this time, which is virtually reprehensible since these elected officials technically are working for their constituents. (However, it was noted

that implementing a term system would likely have trouble being accepted since the politicians providing the approval are essentially putting a time limit on their own jobs).

- **The topic of generational political engagement was raised and the important need to mentor the next generation of leaders.**

A discussion ensued about the fact not enough training may be given to our political leaders, and that there was a time – especially at the local level - when political ‘role models’ enticed new people to sit at the table. As well, it was also talked about the need of having those experienced politicians to take newer ones ‘under their wing’ and mentor them, thus making their work more effective.

- **A suggestion was put forward of the creation of a Chamber-directed survey that could be utilized to help the general public make a more informed choice when it came time to cast to their ballots.**

The idea of a having a survey was suggested following a discussion regarding the recent federal election and how information about the actual issues and platforms was lost amid name-calling, finger-pointing and ‘scandals’ fueled by social media. Although it was mentioned that social media can provide empowerment, such as the mobilization on Facebook in the 2011 overthrow of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, for the most part it has been used to confuse and ‘muddy’ the political waters. Again, the notion of voter apathy was raised and the fact many voters don’t take the time to educate themselves about the issues and struggle at the polls, or not even cast a ballot. Two participants mentioned they had taken ‘online’ voter surveys prior to the election but found the conclusions less than adequate because those responsible clearly had their own agenda the way the questions were focused. Therefore, it was suggested a Chamber-led initiative could be the answer since it is a non-partisan organization and could present the survey in a neutral manner outlining important issues. It was also mentioned the candidates themselves should be asked as part of the survey questions how much they are influenced by social media, noting that many politicians often are ‘bullied’ into making decisions by an outspoken few. (It was also recommended that if a survey could not be created at the local level, perhaps the Canadian Chamber of Commerce could take on this as a larger scale project and survey members of the business community, therefore giving a clearer picture of what voters truly think are the important issues).

- **A Chamber-directed scorecard could be utilized to gauge how a politician has performed their duties, especially those seeking re-election.**

Our participants were quite interested in the idea of having a ‘scorecard’ – especially at the local level - that could cover a wide spectrum rating each politician’s accomplishments in the past term and how these compare to the priorities they touted while running for office. Even counting the number of motions they have put forward for consideration during their term. They agreed this would be a great tool at election time, noting the fact that younger generations are driven by metrics and results and would appreciate it this kind of concise data.