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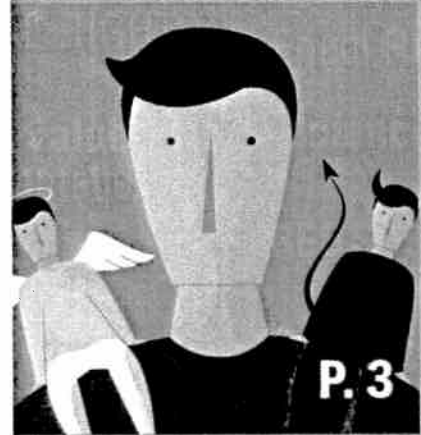
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Academics in Politics

by Tom Flanagan



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TRUTH

If academics succeed in politics, it's not because of their academic achievements, says political scientist and former Conservative campaign manager Tom Flanagan.

The new president of the United States, Barack Obama, once taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago's law school. That makes him unusual in American politics. The only other president or major-party presidential candidate ever to have had a background in university teaching was Woodrow Wilson, who was a distinguished political science professor and president of Princeton University before going into politics.

Canada has had more political leaders with academic backgrounds. William Lyon Mackenzie King, Lester Pearson, Pierre Trudeau, Stéphane Dion, Michael Ignatieff, Ed Broadbent, Jack Layton, and Stephen Harper were all university teachers at one time or another. Maybe this says something about differences between our two countries, but the more striking fact is that only a couple of these leaders—Woodrow Wilson and Stéphane Dion—had university careers in the sense of devoting themselves full time to teaching and academic research for a substantial period of years. The rest all taught briefly at the beginning of their careers and then went on to make their mark in politics, government service, or the media.

There are obvious practical reasons why relatively few university people go into electoral politics in North America. For one thing, the compensation package for a senior professor is equal to, or better than, that of an elected politician, except at the very highest levels of cabinet minister or party leader. University teaching, moreover, offers far greater job security. How many tenured professors want to give up their virtual guarantee of well-paid employment to take a flyer in the political marketplace, where you're always only one election away from unemployment? And then there's the re-entry problem. Outside of a few fields such as political science, if you're off doing politics for 15, or 10 or even five years, it can be almost impossible to go back to teaching and research; you get too far removed from the literature of your field and the routine of academic life.

But there's also a deeper incompatibility between academic life and politics. Those of us who pursue a university career are dedicated to the creation and transmission of fields of knowledge. Ultimately, our mission is to distinguish truth from falsehood, recognizing that truth varies widely in character. At one end lie answers to simple questions about matters of fact: What is the chemical formula of salt? NaCl. Who won the Canadian general election of 1911? Robert Borden's Conservatives. At the other end lie subtle

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tests of hypotheses derived from sophisticated theories: Can the path of electromagnetic radiation be bent by the force of gravitational fields? Yes. Does the introduction of proportional representation lead to the multiplication of parties in the legislature? Almost always. The intellectual tools at work in academic disciplines are rational analysis and empirical investigation. Terms must be clearly defined and then linked together in logically consistent propositions in order to derive predictions that can be tested against data from the external world.

Politics is an entirely different enterprise. It consists of building coalitions to take power and manage the apparatus of government. To paraphrase Tina Turner's question, "What's truth got to do with it?" Very little, is the answer. Politicians aren't engaged in formulating consistent theories and testing hypotheses. Their stock in trade is rhetoric, not logic. As Aristotle pointed out in his lectures on rhetoric, it contains an element of logic, but logic is far from dominant. Effective persuasion in the public domain depends not only on *logos* (reason), but also on *ethos* (the character of the speaker) and *pathos* (the emotion roused by speech). Ultimately, the test for political leaders is not whether they are right or wrong about the real world, but whether they can get their supporters to trust them, thus holding their coalitions together. The truth of propositions is pretty much beside the point. Of course, in the long run policies based on erroneous propositions will fail, as Soviet agricultural policy failed because it was based on Lysenko's theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. But that's a problem for the long run, and politicians considering the prospect of re-election have to take their stand with John Maynard Keynes: "In the long run we are all dead."

Looking at politics from afar, academics of both the left and the right tend to see it as a field for implementing intellectual designs. They often measure their society and their system of government against some abstract standard; in fact, they want not just to measure it, but to make it "measure up" to their intellectually conceived expectations. But a practising





politician is doomed to failure if he tries to proceed this way (unless he can seize total power in the manner of Lenin or Mao). A politician must take people as he finds them and try to bring some of them together in a coalition to gain power. The test of success is not the logic of his thought but the appeal of his rhetoric to those he would lead. Politicians rarely get to implement their own ideas in any straightforward way. More commonly, they end up brokering compromises among different factions of their supporters, ending up with second—or third—best solutions that can be legislated without provoking a violent reaction from their opponents.

I don't agree with Plato that philosophers would make the best rulers, and I don't agree with Aristotle that the *bio theoretikos* (contemplative life) is in some way higher than the political life. Such rankings are typical conceits of brilliant thinkers. I think that the intellectual and the political life are equally beneficial, necessary, and challenging. The important point is that they are different, so that achievement in one is in no way a qualification for achievement in the other. Some academics may also have political ability and may choose to enter politics; but if they succeed there, it will not be because of, and may in fact be in spite of, their academic achievements.

I had to learn all these lessons through practical experience in my own involvement in politics. I have never run for elective office, but I spent two years (1991-92) as director of research for Preston Manning and the Reform Party and almost five years (2001-06) as campaign manager

and chief organizer for Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party.

When I went to work for Manning, I saw the Reform Party as the perfect vehicle for my conservative views on the economy (smaller government, lower taxes, privatization, deregulation, competitive markets, free trade, etc.) and on the Canadian political system (decentralization, direct democracy, opposition to special treatment for Quebec). As director of research, I produced reams of material trying to derive Reform policy positions from what I saw as the first principles of conservatism. But I had little appreciation for the difficulty of developing policies that could win votes.

Though it was far from the biggest issue in my mind, I still have a vivid memory of the Reform convention of 1992, when Manning brokered an essentially meaningless compromise resolution on supply management. I thought then (and I still do in an abstract sense) that supply management is a bad policy that should be ended as soon as possible, with appropriate compensation for producers who have had to purchase dairy quotas. But the political reality was that if Reform was ever going to break into Ontario, it would be in rural constituencies where support for supply management was and is a litmus test of bona fides.

After a couple of years, I had too many disagreements with Preston, so I went back to the university. It's all laid out in my book *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning* (second edition forthcoming imminently). When I look back on those years now, I can see that I simply didn't have enough feeling for real-world politics to be a political adviser. If I were a liberal, I could blame Preston for hiring me; but as a conservative I should at least appear to take responsibility for my own failings!

My second venture into politics was rather different. As described in *Harper's Team: Behind the Scenes in the Conservative Rise to Power* (second edition also forthcoming imminently), several friends and I volunteered to help Harper get started in the fall of 2001 when he decided to contest the Canadian Alliance leadership race. We put together a campaign team, but when it didn't work very well I volunteered to step in and manage the campaign. (It's always

easiest to volunteer to do some something when you don't know anything about it.) When we were successful in that venture, Harper asked me to go to Ottawa with him. I thought he would want me to be his policy adviser, but he wisely asked me to play a different type of role, first as director of operations, then chief of staff, then campaign manager for his Conservative leadership race and for the Conservative campaign in the 2004 general election. After doing the basic organizational work for the next election, I returned to the university, although I did go back and work in the war room in the 2005-06 election campaign.

Throughout these years, I had nothing to do with policy, and very little to do with strategy and communications, even though these are the three areas of politics that normally appeal to academics. I left all these to the leader's supervision while I busied myself with the mundane tasks of raising money, hiring and supervising staff, leasing space, negotiating contracts with suppliers, and finding all the specialists who are so necessary to modern politics—pollsters, advertisers, direct mail consultants, and telemarketers. I discovered a modest managerial ability that would have remained hidden if I had stayed cloistered in the university, but I never developed any policies, created any ads, wrote any speeches, or made any strategic decisions. I just said to the leader, "Tell me what you want done and I'll make it happen." I was the Mussolini (and every political organization has to have one) who made the trains run on time.

During these years academic acquaintances would sometimes approach me to say, "I'd like to help out." "What would you like to do?" I would reply. Almost without exception, they would volunteer to be a policy or communications adviser. "That's nice," I'd say, "but where we really need some help is in raising money (working phone banks, pounding in signs, knocking on doors, etc.)" That would usually be the end of the conversation. Graduate students were willing to do such jobs but not full-fledged academics. I'm glad I posed the dirty-work test to would-be volunteers because it weeded out those to whom (like myself in an earlier incarnation) politics seemed like a sparkling opportunity to implement their grand intellectual designs.

There are, of course, two sides to this coin. Academics are toxic in democratic politics unless they can let go of their intellectualized visions, and political life is a threat to academic integrity. As researchers, our role is to seek relentlessly for the truth (we may not live up to the ideal, but it would be worse if we didn't have the ideal to guide our investigations). As teachers, our job is to convey to students the best knowledge at our disposal and to answer their

questions honestly. But the purpose of politics is persuasion and coalition-building, not truth and honesty. Even in the absence of outright falsehoods, half-and quarter-truths abound. Questions are a threat to be met with talking points and a plan for "bridging away" to other topics. You can never admit you were wrong, at least not until so long after the event that it doesn't matter, because your opponents will immediately jump upon an admission of error as a sign of weakness. You quickly learn that the most effective response to attacks is not a reasoned reply but a quick *ad hominem* smear. So I'm happy I returned to the academy before political practices totally infected my brain.

Politics was exhilarating, albeit exhausting, compared to the genteel lifestyle of academia. The hours are not necessarily longer in politics, but the pace is frantic. Everything is an emergency, and there's lots of reason to worry but little time to think. Preston Manning was right when he said that as soon as you get involved in politics you start to draw down your intellectual capital with little chance to replenish it.

Did I accomplish anything in politics? My fingerprints are not on any laws or policies, but I did help to create some essential political infrastructure. We put together an entire new campaign team for the Conservative Party, including a state-of-the-art operation in voter identification and fundraising, which played a substantial role in the Conservative victories of 2006 and 2008.

Ten years ago, everyone was lamenting that Canadian politics had become uncompetitive because the right had splintered and no one could beat the Liberals. Über-pundit Jeffrey Simpson wrote a book entitled *Our Friendly Dictatorship*, with a cover picture of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien dressed as a Latin American military dictator. Today, Canadian politics is hypercompetitive, with neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives able to open a long-term, decisive lead over the other party.





The result is an unprecedented period of minority government. We've had three elections since 2004, each ending without a majority victory, and most pundits are predicting another election in 2009, as the Liberals try to take advantage of the recession to unseat the Conservatives, just as the Conservatives took advantage of Adscam to unseat the Liberals. But as long as the Bloc Québécois can hold its ground in Quebec, it would probably be another minority government, even if the Liberals did manage to come back under Michael Ignatieff's leadership. Now we can move on from fretting about the pathologies of one-party domination to worrying about the inability of minority governments to make the tough decisions demanded by the global recession.

I wasn't hoping for this outcome when I went off to spend five years with the Conservatives, but the results of any political initiative always emerge in complex interaction with the responses of all the other actors who are involved. If you want to control the results of what you do, you can go paint a picture, compose music, or write a poem. Politics is a spontaneous art form like improv theatre or dancing without a choreographer.

You can make permanent contributions to intellectual life. You can prove a mathematical theorem, or discover a new species in the jungle, or edit the papers of a famous poet. The value of your work will remain, even if others build on it. But accomplishment in politics is much more transitory. Most political careers end in defeat, and most political arrangements are eventually undone. Yet we are drawn to politics, like moths to the flame. As Aristotle said (and he was right about this), human beings are "political animals." Academics are welcome in the political zoo, but don't expect any special treatment from the untenured animals! ■

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*Dr. Judith Sinanga Ohlmann
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*Dr. Sherah Vanlaerhoven
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