

In defence of academic 'fiddling'

Scholars' most valuable contributions to public debate are grounded in research, writes Philippe Lagassé.

By Philippe Lagassé, Ottawa Citizen June 9, 2013

Are political scientists failing to play their part as critics of the government in Canada? Lawrence Martin thinks so. Writing in the *Globe and Mail* last week, he lamented that academics are busy working on narrow research projects, instead of using their privileged positions to find fault with those in power. Pointing to the activism of scholars past, Martin wondered why a new generation of public intellectuals has not followed suit, taking to the op-ed pages and talk shows to name and shame politicians who abuse their authority.

Coincidentally, Martin's missive appeared at the same time as the annual conference of the Canadian Political Science Association. The column was met with bewilderment by many at the conference. A quick glance at the program explains why. Included among the presenters were professors and graduate students who routinely analyze current events in print, online, and on the air.

There is no shortage of critical commentary about Canadian political affairs from academics, young or old.

Of note, Canadian newspapers and magazines have recently featured political scientists critically assessing the prorogation of the Ontario legislature, Supreme Court decisions, the tactics and rhetoric of the Conservative party, the Idle No More movement, Canadian foreign, health, and social policy, and military procurements. This newspaper has been particularly open to publishing academics, but more than a few of these articles have appeared in Martin's own newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*.

While it is hard to measure, a good case can be made that these academic contributions have been influential, either eliciting a reaction from government or helping the opposition sharpen their attacks. Regardless, these articles have been informative, boiling down dense academic research into short, accessible pieces that fuel debate and discussion about Canadian politics.

Given the evident presence of political scientists in public debates, it appears that Martin is more concerned with what they say and write, instead of how often they do so. What Martin really wants are more vitriolic and categorical critiques of the Conservative government from political scientists.

Is this an appropriate request? I am skeptical. While there will be occasions when governments deserve to be lambasted by academics, this is a job best left to pundits and partisans. Just as we expect journalists to stick to the facts in their reporting, political scientists should strive to follow the research. If a professor's work leads him or her to conclude that a government merits a harsh rebuke, then so be it. But, speaking for myself, I have noted that careful analyses of a government's actions usually lead to cautious criticisms, or guarded defences, of what governments are up to. The same, it must be said, holds for policies and positions of the opposition parties.

Indeed, academic research serves as a useful corrective against the facile truisms that routinely take hold of political commentaries.

Discussions of Canada's political institutions are a case in point. It has become "common knowledge" that the prime minister is all powerful, ministerial accountability is dead, and parties and partisanship hinder our democracy. As someone who is currently researching the executive and Parliament, I find these assertions problematic. It is not that they are wrong per se, but they should be tempered by a consideration of longer term trends and contrary evidence.

Other academics will disagree with my findings, of course. But it precisely because we "fiddle" with research projects, as Martin remarks, that we are able to compare competing theories, methods, and evidence, allowing us to refine our work and arrive at better answers to complex political questions. Political science professors would be failing as researchers if they simply embraced whichever meme about the state of Canadian politics happens to be popular at the moment.

For Martin, this concern with research is cowardice. He seems to think that our focus on "things that can be empirically proven" is a failing. This is a baffling statement. The credibility of academics rests with the fact that they are preoccupied with what can be proven. If political scientists gave up on rigour and evidence, they would not be of much use to anybody, including those opposed to the current government.

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