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We need bold and inspirational leaders

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The western world has changed a lot over the years. It's a kinder, gentler place. It's also a whole lot duller, at least politically speaking.

It's goodbye cigar-chomping Winston Churchill and hello eco-friendly Al Gore . . . and bland brainiacs Michael Ignatieff and Stephen Harper.

Gone is brash and ballsy. In are earnest, bookish and safe. And the question is whether candidates in this lacklustre B.C. election are being forced to be so politically correct they can no longer voice candid, down-to-earth views.

Are we, in fact, so intent on turning them into good little New Age puritans that we're sucking the life out of them?

Certainly, we've come a long way in B.C. from the days when Flying Phil Gaglardi, the Socred highways minister, got so many speeding tickets his licence was suspended in 1957. But he remained unrepentant, arguing he was the greatest road-builder since the Romans and the speed limits were set too low.

Fast forward to John van Dongen who on Monday, after racking up a series of speeding tickets, walked away from the solicitor-general's job with his tail firmly between his legs. "I want to make sure that people understand that there is no excuse for my driving pattern," he said.

And I'm not about to disagree. We don't need someone who's supposed to be in charge of enforcing B.C.'s laws rushing around breaking them.

But I can't imagine Flying Phil eating crow like that. Nor can lobbyist Mike Geoghegan, a former ministerial aide fired in 2003 as B.C.

Construction Association president for frank but politically unacceptable comments he made about NDP MLA Jenny Kwan.

Indeed, the 43-year-old Geoghegan wonders whether, with the squeaky-clean lifestyles and neutered opinions we now demand from our Internet-era politicians, we're not so much choosing people's representatives as vestal virgins. "In the coming decades, pretty much anyone under the age of 40 who has had any kind of a life is going to have some kind of compromising photograph," he said.

And he agrees with me that Ray Lam, the NDP candidate for Vancouver-False Creek, should not have had to step down because of the cheeky photos posted on his Facebook account.

As for Liberal Marc Dalton, the Maple Ridge-Mission candidate roasted for an e-mail he sent in 1996 claiming homosexuality was a moral issue, Geoghegan said it was good voters knew what he'd said, but that for him to resign would send the wrong message. The fact is folks have the right to change their minds over time.

Myself, I'd never argue that any candidates for public office should be above public scrutiny. But I agree with Geoghegan that these days we badly need bold, inspirational, flesh-and-blood leaders, not automatons.

The trouble is these kind of hard-driving politicians tend to have a maverick streak. And, as Geoghegan points out, the safest way to ensure you never ruffle feathers is never to say or do anything.

Besides, who among us sticks religiously to the speed limits anyway?

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