

# Make Room in Your Echo Chamber

**By Monica Guetre**

Democracy can't exist when we only hear opinions from politicians that tout the party line to incite their membership base.

Listening to only what like minded people say means that we'll continue to repeat the existing status quo. It is self serving since an echo chamber re-affirms a believer's bias.

This echo chamber is like buying one of those self-help books, dismissing what is too hard to change while liking the bits that already affirm what you believe in. I'd ask what was the point of buying and reading that book, if you are not going to try to do the big changes.

For some, it's a hard decision to look inwards anymore because of really smart social media algorithms. But ask yourself what is your slippery slope? Do you excuse a leader that targets the differences between us or picks on the vulnerable because they "say" they are going to create more jobs or lower taxes?

This narrow tunnel vision leaves no room to encourage new ideas that actually could make life better, or create life changing opportunity that we never even saw coming. This irrational type of politics leaves out the majority of us; it leaves no room for common sense or consensus building. Is it really about the left or right? Instead let's meet respectfully somewhere in the middle.

One example is the attack on universal healthcare where cost is shared and based on national standards. It was a bold idea that took hold outside of the main stream bias of politics. It became a game-changer for those at the time and for us today.

Recently the political echo chamber worked overtime leading up to the Federal-Provincial-Territorial health-care talks with some Premiers threatening to look at some sort of private health care system. Most of us already know that going down that road means ending up with a two-tiered system; one for those that can pay and the leftovers for the rest of us. Essentially throwing us back to the 1950s.

Extreme political echo chamber biases do increase social and political polarization and even makes a pathway for violent extremism to take hold. Some politicians even give subtle or overt cover to extremists within their own party leading to hate and violence when they don't condemn this rhetoric. Under those conditions hate filled extremists will find a foot-hold because many Canadians get tired of listening to the same narrow-minded ranting over and over. It all becomes blah-blah-blah and we end up disinterested.

But turning away is not what we should be doing. We really need to listen carefully to what the political echo chambers are saying because we'll be making our own life decisions based on what we hear. We have to make the effort to push back more, get involved. When we don't say something or counter back, then we are saying, we accept and agree with these extreme prejudices.

Our inaction allows extremist rhetoric to flourish in Canada. Take a hard look at what happens when we put our heads in the sand.

Our prime minister gets pelted with rocks, our leaders get threatened with violence all of the time and even women politicians are physically accosted. This spills over affecting our daily life.

Last year's Winnipeg Police Service's annual crime report showed that hate crimes went up by 46.2 per cent in 2021 from 2020. Crimes involving race/ethnicity was the most reported crime at 53 per cent, followed by religion at 39 per cent, and sexual orientation at eight per cent. Look at the gunman who shot and killed a soldier at the National War Memorial in Ontario. He went on to try and kill politicians in our Parliament, or the man who opened fire at an Islamic Cultural Centre killing six people and wounding 19 others. This shooter was reportedly a known activist with nationalist, anti-feminist views. Or how about the Incel Movement that advocates violence against women which has influenced over 50 attacks in the United States and Canada with online forums. This single online echo chamber influenced a man to drive a van down a busy street in Toronto killing ten and injuring 16. What about the rise of groups such as Diagonale and Proud Boys, both are neo-fascist groups engaged in political violence espouse misogynistic, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, and white supremacist ideologies.

We need to hold our politicians accountable; make their echo chambers accountable to us, instead of the other way around. We are the taxpayer and the voter! We are the ones with control over our shared values. As soon as you hear a politician or self-proclaimed leader say all our woes are because of immigration, refugees, religion, equality, gender, language and so on, don't run for the hills. Pull the alarm bell and push back, sometimes loudly but always respectfully. Our Canadian Charter does not protect expression such as hate speech that involves threats or the form of violence. Hate has nothing to do with our protected fundamental freedom of free speech.

How do we hold politicians and their echo chamber accountable?

First, let them know that cozying up to hateful extremists is not okay and they need to publicly denounce this type of activity and not just a single time, repeatedly as the message needs to be heard.

For those of us who have been through quite a few election cycles, we already know that each political party talks about the same basic topics. Unless there is some huge new idea it's always going to be about health-care, education, jobs, taxes, infrastructure.

Let's not allow ourselves to go down the slippery slopes. Be firm don't allow any excuse for hateful behaviour.

When politicians get to healthcare, don't blow a gasket from frustration. Ask how are they going to be accountable and get specific. How will you increase the number of medical professionals, reduce wait times, make it more efficient, and most unimportantly, how will be kept free and accessible across the whole country in rural and urban areas?

On education ask what is the measure of success. Is your plan affordable, will it help our children and post secondary students excel to be ready for future opportunities and continue to be inclusive, does it allow failure?

When they say more jobs are coming... ask where and what kind of job? Is the job dependent on renewable resources or not? Does it put food on the table and a roof over our head?

Is that infrastructure plan going to benefit us? Can the problem be solved for less money? Is it sustainable? Where will this money be spent? Can it reduce our own household costs, and does it make our lives healthier and safer?

For taxes, show us who really gets the tax break. Is it actually lower taxes or just a credit that you only get over a certain income threshold? Is the tax break for big business? Will it made to hinder small business and

individuals? What is going to be cut or what are you going to increase to pay for that?

Stay aware and recognize that political echo chambers will always generalize their plan of action but they should never espouse hate. A political plan is different from the reality of governing with fairness, equality and respect of our freedom.

We are fortunate that we don't live in the extreme echo chambers of Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria... places that don't allow any type of discourse since they control the media. The majority of people in those countries only hear what their government wants them to hear in order to justify absolute control with their wars, imprisonment, torture, and disappearances.