

Jokers to the Right

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, September 05, 2016

<http://politicsrespun.org/2016/09/jokers-to-the-right/>

It's time we learn more lessons from Archie Bunker. While the right wing continues to become increasingly clownish, we need to go back to Norman Lear's classic 1970s sitcom, *All in the Family*, to get re-acquainted with Archie Bunker's willful embrace of ignorance and bigotry to learn where he's coming from and how to protect our world.

So let's look at the threats lurking underneath the clownish behaviour of right wing politicians, and examine how a visionary, progressive, engaged labour movement can confront it. This trip takes us from the new Manitoba government to Brazil, to Donald Trump to Kevin O'Leary to Austria, and ends with Justin Trudeau.

Let's start with a warning. These clowns and buffoons we are enduring, Trump and O'Leary jump to mind, are not to be underestimated. There is analysis suggesting that the ridiculous behaviour and ignorant policy statements are just an act to get free media coverage and attract votes. But we can't let this possibility make us complacent.

The increasing prevalence of right wing clowns is designed to normalize these radical and offensive social, economic and political attitudes. We cannot let the evaporation and resignation of Stephen Harper make us content.

So let's stroll around the world to see what we are up against.

The Manitoba NDP recently lost government, replaced with the Progressive Conservatives, who are not progressive. The new government caucus is 80% men. They appointed an Anglophone woman to be minister responsible for the francophone as well as sports, heritage, women and culture. Hers will be the ministry of "all the things the government doesn't care about."

Brazil has stepped back to the right wing privatization of the 1980s and maybe a touch of Chile in 1973. The right wing coup/impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff is class warfare. The new president immediately established a cabinet of only white men, and dissolved progressive ministries dealing with food, women, culture, science, racial equality, and human rights.

Then, the new president contacted the International Monetary Fund and Goldman Sachs to create a

neoliberal structural adjustment program for the country, a tool that has decimated rich and poor nations around the world for two generations. This program is about destroying the progressive capacity of governments, in part by privatizing government services and corporations. So we need to monitor Canadian pension funds to make sure they don't try to buy parts of Brazil's public infrastructure at low, neoliberal prices.

Donald Trump is no clown. He's a poster boy for white, male, corporate, 1% entitlement and backlash against recent generations of progressive change in society. He also resonates so well with people who have learned to keep their bigotry to themselves. Trump is popular because he is affirming their ideas and giving them license to revel in them, publicly.

Kevin O'Leary has long annoyed progressive Canadians because of his reactionary opposition to people who are not rich, white and entitled. His spirits have been buoyed recently with Stephen Harper's resignation as party leader and Trump's success in channeling anti-social views. Even if he never becomes leader of the Conservative/Reform Party of Canada, we need to be wary of whatever higher profile he may drift into in the near future.

A Green Party-supported independent candidate narrowly won Austria's presidency in May in a run-off against an anti-immigration far right candidate with—take a deep breath—massive support from blue collar workers. Trump also has massive blue collar support.

Back in Canada, Trudeau has been in office for half a year and is already living up to the Liberal cliché of campaigning from the left and governing from the right. You can track how he is rapidly breaking election promises at Trudeaumetre.ca as he is framing himself as the new Harper with regressive trade, environmental and social policies.

So how do we confront these increasingly desperate right wing tactics and behaviours?

Archie Bunker taught us that providing a voice of ignorance and bigotry in a sitcom character keeps it from festering in back alleys. It also lets society see what debating controversial issues looks like.

And while it also seemed useful to mock Archie Bunker, that kind of mockery seems to have helped drive people with bigoted sentiments underground, until they began emerging recently, like with the "election" of George W. Bush.

So how should the labour movement contend with this new right?

1. We need to start with our values: dignity, respect, equity, responsibility and accountability. These should frame how we engage with right wing issues. So let's make sure we stop referring to Trump and O'Leary as clowns and buffoons.
2. Since ignorance and bigotry are based in fear, we need to leverage our particular skills and insight as a labour movement to address what makes people afraid: insecure and precarious work, underemployment, vulnerable housing, social insecurity, inability to feel confident about being able to raise our families, equity, dignity, human rights.

3. Since working people are resonating well with both Trump and Bernie Sanders, we can see they're desperate for change, however it gets expressed. Our movement must more effectively engage with our members to help them see how progressive changes address their fears as well as improve society. Part of how we do this is to leave the political rhetoric and statistics aside and champion people in the labour movement to tell their stories about how progressive change has helped them.