

Re: "Shame!"

by kevin harding - Sunday, April 17, 2011

<http://politicsrespun.org/2011/04/re-shame/>

I have an old stand-by joke for partisan political events that I happen upon or at which I end up. How can you tell an NDP event?

The cries of "Shame! Shame!"

There are a few tropes we can pile together about political rallies. Conservative ones seem to have hired goons at the door and only admitted the evangelical supporters, forceably ejecting (sometimes by means of the RCMP) anyone who doesn't agree. Liberal ones have people in suits, well-dressed, career type people, out for a day of cheering for whoever will get them a job in the Natural Governing Party. And yet the NDP is the one that sometimes feels like a 'born-again' church ceremony, with the mutually expected choruses of "Shame!"

(I went to the NDP's platform launch in Toronto: Jack Layton, energetic and Lenin-Lookalike as always, even taught us to yell it *en Français*: "Honteuse!" Also, I suppose: "Honteux!")

[Alex has recently written about the superhero narrative in popular fiction](#). In her piece, she talks about the feelings of worthlessness that this narrative can instil, at how disempowering that it can be -- unless you happen to be the superhero. She instead suggests we need a different narrative, one of collective hope, collective action... perhaps a more democratic narrative.

So why is it that the NDP sticks to this "Shame!" trope?

There's a specific narrative at use. The other guys did something SHAMEFUL. ("Shame! Shame! *Honteux!*") And the NDP won't be as SHAMEFUL. ("Yay!")

It's an oddly patriarchal narrative, and the discourse dynamics of what does on is, in my mind, nerve-grinding. The party sets up the scenario. The party identifies the shameful situation. The party expects the faithful to yell "Shame! Shame!" and maybe "*Honteux!*"

It's basically a 3 step process: 1. Shameful situation is exposed. 2. "Shame! *Honteux!*" 3. The NDP will do the opposite.

One, the use of the word "shame!" really strikes me as outdated. It's not what we'd say today. Admittedly, they can't yell out what I'd be thinking ("That's fucked!" maybe "*C'est fucké!*"), but "shame!" strikes me as what my lovely grandmother would yell at the TV. Actually, no, she'd be slightly more forceful. The groupthink feeling is slightly creepy - when you're at the event, you're expected to cheer along.

And the discourse is disempowering. The role of the public is to chant "shame!" when the politicians present the proper incentive. Not much else. Actually, I think it's similar to [Alex's superhero narrative](#) -

here, the NDP is the superhero, the evil-doing has been presented, and the NDP will be off to fix the problem!

Other rallies - by all parties - have the same problem. A political issue is presented that must be changed. Who's going to change it? The party and the politicians! I was at an NDP rally about the HST in Vancouver, and the speakers said something along the lines of "You tell us what you think needs to be done, and we're gonna do it for you!" Of course, there was ample amounts of "Shame!" built in. The same thing just happened at the BC NDP convention when Adrian Dix won the leadership of the BC NDP - the BC Liberals are full of "Shame!" and the NDP are not.

There isn't much discussion of *why* the NDP aren't as shameful - just that the BC Liberals/Conservatives/[Evil Reptilian Kitten Eaters from Another Planet](#) are full of *shame!*

But what can be done?

We need to think of a different way of organizing ourselves politically. Parties - and the stupid political system (FPTP) that we're currently stuck with, because of parties - are constructs that are designed to win mass and vague support from large amounts of people. They're supposed to channel political action through the parties, limiting the role of people - like you and me - to simply [assigning our support to the party that is the least offensive, in the hopes of avoiding the most offensive from taking total control.](#)

We need to work on this. A better world is needed. And I don't think simply yelling "Shame! *Honteux!*" at the people whom we hope won't be *as bad* is the best way we can do it. We need a more democratic narrative, where we're not reduced to yelling "shame!" at things we don't like but actively working towards the things that we do like. Like Alex says, we need a political reality and discourse where "[\[w\]e can define our own lives and tell our own stories, because we don't need no superheros.](#)"

Or to simply shout "Shame!"

That we must, for now, is...

...a shame.