

Barbara Kay: Trump, Trudeau and the front lines of the fight against bull

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American commentator Joseph Epstein once described himself, vocationally speaking, as “standing off on the sidelines, viewing the various public escapades — political, cultural, social — and calling out with some regularity, “Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit!” Epstein had his work cut out for him in 2017. Didn’t all opinion journalists?

Donald Trump alone provided stablefuls of the stuff. And that’s without even counting all his lies. It’s common error to conflate the two, but lying and bullshitting are two different phenomena, although, as Trump daily demonstrates, one can be both a liar and a bullshitter. It’s important to distinguish between the two, because lies arouse such deep anger in us that we will expend great energy in exposing them. But bullshitting is tough to combat, because it isn’t so easily defined as a lie, and because bullshitters are often well tolerated, or even admired when their humbug taps into certain listeners’ worldview.

Since bullshit can have serious political and cultural consequences, it’s worth all concerned citizens’ time and effort to arm themselves cognitively against the bamboozlement that can entrap even seasoned pundits when the bullshit is especially artful. A good place to start is with an essay written in 2005 by Princeton University moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit.”

Frankfurt begins by noting that both lying and bullshit give false representations of the truth, but with different motivations. A lie is meant to give listeners a false belief as to an actual state of affairs (“If you like your doctor, you can keep your doctor”), while bullshitters are only bent on giving an audience “a false impression concerning what is going on in the mind of the speaker.” Today we often call bullshitting “virtue signalling.” Donald Trump says he will “make America great again” and Justin Trudeau talks about “who we are as Canadians,” but it is not facts or truth they have in mind as they speak. Rather, they seek to convey a portrait of themselves — Trump as a great patriot, Trudeau as an avatar of Canadian “values.”

To construct a lie, a liar “must design his falsehood under the guidance of the truth.” That is, he must know the truth in order to invert it. A bullshitter has far more freedom: “His focus is panoramic rather than particular.” He can mingle truths with lies, facts with narrative, objectivity with subjectivity. The purpose of the bullshitter is “neither to report the truth nor to conceal it.” His most salient characteristic is that it’s all about him; the impulse is to conceal his enterprise, to misrepresent “what he is up to.”

Politicians are particularly prone to bullshitting because bullshit “is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about.” Then too, there is a “widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything, or at least everything that pertains to the conduct of his country’s affairs.”

In answer to his own question, “Why is there so much bullshit?” Frankfurt makes two important takeaway points. The first touches on postmodernism (not his word) and the prevailing cultural force of skepticism regarding objective reality. Our era’s “anti-realist doctrines undermine confidence in the value of disinterested efforts to determine what is true and what is false.” The second, influenced by the first, notes a loss of confidence and a retreat from the ideal of “correctness” in favour of a discipline “imposed by pursuit of an alternative ideal, sincerity.” If there is no such thing as inherent reality, there is only the individual “being true to his own nature.”

But who is the least qualified person to judge one’s own honesty? “Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial, notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit.”

Frankfurt’s essay, and especially those last four words, rocked me. For when I look back on all the bullshitters that have piqued my writerly irritation — utopian academics who consider speech suppression a tool for bending the “arc of history” where they think it ought to be; gender pseudo-scholars who reject the science of biology; fighting-dog advocates who deny the genetic component of canine breed behaviours; feminists who embrace the niqab as an alternate expression of female freedom; the entire BDS movement; Indigenous and black “reconciliation” activists who refuse reconciliation in favour of continual whiteness shaming — they are all willing to throw science, epidemiology, history and democratic principles under the bus to serve theory or emotion-based ends.

But oh, how they gush with sincerity. And oh, how they love themselves for it. And oh, what a pain in the butt they are for polemicists who stubbornly cling to objectivity and truths, however uncomfortable they sometimes are, as the gold standard for public discourse.