

Discussion versus political pressure

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My eleven-year-old son, a grade fiver in a local public school, recently circulated a petition among his peers. The petition demanded that the school ensure that pupils have at least 20 minutes to eat their lunch (apparently kids were spending a lot of time in line) and that the cafeteria offer vegetarian meals more often.

I found out about this from the vice-principal at his school. When I picked my son up from her son’s birthday party, she mentioned that his petition drive was going very well. “What petition drive?” I asked.

If your children are like mine, they never tell you anything.

Of course, I’m happy and proud that my son is politically active and unafraid of standing up and being counted. I’m happy and proud of his organizational abilities, though certainly he got those from his mother. I also approve of his causes.

And yet I’m troubled by the fact that he chose the means he did. Petitions, after all, are not ways of discovering the best policy. They are instruments by which one applies pressure in favour of one’s demand.

I would rather he had organized a discussion, a discussion to which he’d invited the principal and vice-principal as well as his fellow pupils and whoever else wanted to come. He could make his arguments, listen to other arguments and criticisms of his arguments, and thereby engage with pupils and administrators in trying to find solutions that serve as many of the relevant concerns as possible.

By organizing a petition drive, he traded argument and discussion for pressure. He reinforced the us-and-them attitude that always obtains between those outside and those within an administration. By creating sides, he risked getting people’s backs up and making the thing personal. If people perceive that someone wins and someone loses, winning (or at least not losing) becomes their goal, and out goes whatever concern they might have had to discover and do what’s right.

I hope he wins both more time for eating and more vegetarian offerings, but I’m afraid he might lose the second. After all, demand for vegetarian offerings might not be great enough to make it economically viable. The administration might explain this to him and his peers, and they might see the justice in it, but because of the way the issue was presented to it, the administration would be giving its explanation from on high, not as a conversational partner.

The demand that vegetarian meals be offered more often raises issues about accommodating minority interests when doing so draws resources away from the majority. Is

that fair? Would it be fair if it emerged as a commitment made democratically? These are questions that would come up naturally in a discussion. Pressure won't resolve them.

On the other hand, maybe politics is effective and discussion isn't. After all, the administration already has its policy. The administration might not care to discuss it. All that's left is pressure.

In my own dealings with administrators at my son's school, I've found that they are not particularly interested in argument or discussion. That a policy is a policy, I've learned, is often for them the end of the matter.

I've had the same sort of experience with administrators at my university. If my arguments are unsound, I've not heard that they are from them. I don't know if they are aware of my efforts to discuss matters critically with them, for they haven't replied. They respond to pressure, not argument.

A couple weeks ago I participated in a debate on abortion. My opponent and I agreed very early that if abortion is itself seriously immoral, then it should be subject to legal rules and limits. Since we disagreed whether it is immoral, we left aside the question of the law and debated the moral status of the fetus.

Members of politically active pro-choice groups were fierce in condemning my performance. I did nothing, they said, to galvanize and motivate pro-choice forces. I did nothing to stigmatize those who would deny a woman her right to choose. Indeed, in raising the question of the moral status of the fetus, I risked bringing those who rejected my arguments over to the other side, thereby harming the cause.

Even on a university campus, when the topic's abortion, we pro-choicers fail unless we use the occasion politically, to advance the cause.

This preference for pressure and politics over discussion runs throughout contemporary social and political life. It runs through contemporary life because pressure stands a chance of effecting change, while mere argument doesn't.

Can this be changed? Can we come to value discussion, and attempt to apply pressure only when we've uncovered rock-bottom differences in value or commitment?

I'm a person who has made dispassionate inquiry and free discussion his central cause in life. I also take an active role in raising my children. Can I be hopeful that people will someday come to appreciate the virtues of discussion and the vices of pressure when my eleven-year-old son's first thought is to circulate a petition?