Martinuk: Let's ignore celebrity popularity contests

BY SUSAN MARTINUK, CALGARY HERALD   OCTOBER 25, 2013

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Nobody likes a hypocrite.

So you can imagine my surprise this week when I read a newspaper headline proclaiming that a poll has found Canada's premier science entertainer, David Suzuki, to be the most admired Canadian.

Really? Maybe in the past.

But in recent years, Suzuki has been exposed as a student of the Al Gore school of hyper-environmentalism — where you publicly "talk the talk" about reducing carbon footprints and saving the forest (for an outrageous fee) and privately "walk the walk" on the floors of multiple, huge, energy-consuming mansions while jetting around the country or enjoying the power boat at the end of the dock.

Suzuki is paid $30,000 per speech to lecture students about the evils of capitalism. He stood with Occupy Vancouver to decry the financial gains of big corporations, while his own David Suzuki Foundation had an annual intake of $9 million and has more than $10 million invested in stocks and bonds. He calls for a simplistic lifestyle and reduced carbon footprint, while he owns two million-dollar homes in Vancouver (the property value alone for his mansion overlooking English Bay is $8.2 million), has a home on Quadra Island and shares ownership of another island with, among others, an oil company.

That's four properties in B.C. alone. Alert the authorities: We've found Bigfoot and he has a massive carbon footprint.

It's too easy to get sidetracked on the private/public dichotomy of Suzuki's life. Suffice to say, that despite all this coming to light, the Angus Reid Global poll claims that 57 per cent of Canadians admire this man and the news headlines proclaim he tops the list as the most admired man in Canada.

But context is everything when presenting data and, in this case, further scrutiny shows the list of names pollsters offered Canadians gave them very little to admire.

Second place (with 50 per cent approval) goes to Rick Hansen, an iconic figure currently surrounded by controversy. He is paid more than $400,000 per year by his foundation, but has yet to answer questions about an 84 per cent increase in salaries and benefits for foundation workers at a time it was losing millions of dollars and making minimal investments in research.

Peter Mansbridge follows with an admiration rate of 48 per cent, and Margaret Atwood ranks fourth (just one week after Alice Munro wins a Nobel Prize for literature?), along with Justin Trudeau at 34 per cent. But a closer look at the numbers shows that more people dislike Trudeau than admire him. Forty-five per cent of Canadians don't admire the young leader, whose most significant policy pronouncement thus far is a statement that he has smoked marijuana and supports its legalization.

From Trudeau on, the list of admired Canadians distinctly morphs into a list of those who are not admired at all.

Mike Duffy, Pamela Wallin, Conrad Black, Don Cherry and a group of political leaders (as expected) polled negative numbers. So did turncoat Belinda Stronach and CEO of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games, John Furlong (who is now known for unproven accusations of sexually assaulting his students decades ago).

What — and who — is there to admire in this list? No wonder Suzuki topped the list.

But that in no way makes Suzuki anything close to being the most admired Canadian.

Angus Reid Global and most media outlets that reported on this poll turned it into one big mess of confusion. The fine print missing from many articles is that this is not a list of most admired Canadians — it's a list of "headline makers and high-profile individuals" that was pre-selected with obvious bias (so left wing equals good and right wing equals bad) and then presented to Canadians for their approval or disapproval.

While notable names (like astronaut Chris Hadfield) were absent from the list, Shachi Kurl, the Angus Reid Global vice-president responsible for this provocative and nonsensical attempt to understand who Canadians most admire, stated that she deliberately left him off the list because he was too "obvious."

That is, in a poll that claims to determine who Canadians most admire, at least one individual was omitted because he was, in fact, too admirable.

When pollsters deliberately attempt to create/influence public opinion rather than reflect it, it's clearly time to stop believing in what they are telling us.

Susan Martinuk is a western Canadian-based writer whose column appears every Friday.