Deciding the fate of Banff

"For Plato, the argumentation worthy of a philosopher should convince the gods themselves."

—Chaim Perelman

The fate of Banff National Park, surely one of the most beautiful places on the planet, is important to everyone, but particularly to Albertans. Should there be more development—expansion of ski hills and so on, or should the wilderness be restored and preserved? Those who argue for development say that the Park exists to be enjoyed, and that development provides access for more people. Those who argue for restoration and preservation say that more access will destroy the wildlife and the natural beauty that constitute Banff's value in the first place.

Banff municipality, the province and the federal government all have different ideas about the direction Banff should be going. How does the ordinary person form an opinion on this issue? Is it possible to take a position that transcends self interest? What view should prevail?

Our Public Debate section presents a controversy about which strong opposing views have been published in books or research papers. We ask the writers of opposing opinions to review each other's work. In this issue Barry Cooper and Rick Searle go head to head over Banff's fate. We intend this to provoke discussion, not to harden oppositions.

The democratic process requires discussion and debate for people to arrive at a decision on a course of action. Rhetoric—the ancient art of persuasive argument—and democracy were born at the same time in Syracuse in the 5th century BC. Debate may be anathema in Alberta's cultural climate, where it is considered rude to discuss politics and ruder still to disagree—verboten in a province where we rarely elect to the legislature enough members of a non-ruling party to enable them to form an effective opposition—witness the recent election. Nevertheless, debate is essential to clear thinking.

The point of debate is not that one side should win and the other lose, but that the exchange of ideas and arguments improves the quality of our thinking. Rigid ideological positions do not solve the problems of society. However, as in sport, a worthy opponent can bring out the best in a contender. When people disagree, we are made aware that we have choices, a range of options in deciding what to do.

For Plato, truth was absolute and existed outside language. Today we understand that the language we use to think about a topic largely determines the "truth" we arrive at.

In ancient times rhetoric was addressed to a crowd of generally incompetent listeners gathered in a public place. An argument might be effective and move them to action without necessarily being a good argument. But effectiveness is not the only test of an argument's value. The nature of the audience must also be considered. The value of an argument depends on the quality and competence of the minds who accept it. Therefore Plato's position was that the only worthy argument is one which convinces the gods—an appeal to reason and the highest values.

We like to think our readers have sufficient godliness and good farm sense to distinguish wheat from chaff.

Let us know what you think.

Jackie Flanagan