

# Raising Cain

by Fred Stenson

As parents, we are told that the double whammy of nature and nurture means we are the primary determiners of the path our offspring will take in life. Sometimes, I think Bart and Homer Simpson had more to do with mine, but for the sake of the present argument, let's say this opening hypothesis is true. If so, parents should have some sort of guidance on how to train a child to be a politician—or an activist, if that is more what you'd prefer.

Sure, sure, I am aware that politician and activist are not mutually exclusive terms, but I'm talking about a *governing* politician.

As for activist, what I mean by that term is someone who acts upon a sincere wish to see society change in an improving direction. The closest most contemporary governing politicians come to that is the sly turning of a blind eye while the Supreme Court does the heavy lifting. For example, on the recent moves to permit state-sanctioned same-sex mar-



riages, governing has become such a covert activity that some say Alberta Premier Ralph Klein actually supports the idea of same-sex marriages, while threatening to invoke the notwithstanding clause of the Constitution to prevent it. This would allow him to placate his neo-fundamentalist caucus brethren *and* obey his own instincts, the ones that once made him the people's mayor of Calgary and a friend to the little guy (without checking first who the little guy sleeps with).

But back to parenting and how you guide a politician or an activist into being.

For the parent of a burgeoning politician, I think it is never too early to begin embedding the mantra

that "a rule is the words of the rule," as opposed to the spirit or intended meaning of the rule. Somewhere along the line, the law on marriage was written up as "the union of a man and a woman." The intent was likely to differentiate marriage from other

kinds of unions, say, between a near-sighted parakeet and a Sergei Fedorov bobble-head doll. I think the intent may also have been to emphasize the singular, so that, on a cultish whim, a community could not marry all its women to all its men. Whatever politicians have been saying lately, I sincerely doubt that the original wording of that description of marriage was to prevent legal unions of man and man and woman and woman.

In Ontario, different justifications are used, but they're just as illogical. When an election in his province was looming large, then-Premier Eves explained to us that he couldn't favour same-sex marriage because "of his upbringing."

“I went to Sunday school every Sunday and became an altar boy,” he told the press.

Now, I too was an altar boy, and I did go to Sunday school as well, perhaps not as regularly as Mr. Eves, because I missed the lesson where it was said, “When you grow up, you will go on persecuting homosexuals as we have done. Particularly, do not allow them to marry.”

When Pierre Elliot Trudeau passed the law legalizing homosexuality, keeping government out of the bedrooms of the nation, one would have thought that, by extension of logic, all the freedoms enjoyed by heterosexuals—permission of the state to marry, for example—would have passed to homosexuals, too; but not so. The politically savvy ones, wielding the “rule is the words of the rule” justification, swooped in to prevent it.

IF YOU WANT YOUR CHILDREN to learn this powerful form of political “logic,” this is how you do it. Say your neighbour shows up at your door, claiming your daughter and son beat up their child, Billy. Likely, you will say to your children, “Enough of that, children. No more hitting Billy.” Next day, the neighbours are back, claiming this time your children delivered a beating to their daughter, Sally. You go back to your children and say, “Didn’t I tell you to stop beating up the neighbour children?” But what if your children get cute little demonic grins on their faces, and one says, “Au contraire, pater, you specifically said, ‘Don’t hit Billy.’ You said nothing whatsoever about Sally.”

This is a pivotal moment in your children’s development and in your career as a parent. If you would have them become activists, send them to their rooms. Give them bread and water for a week, and maybe a good exorcism. If you want politicians in the family, slip them each a twenty, give them a knowing wink, and send them out for a night on the town.

Continue this pattern of positive reinforcement for the remainder of their childhoods, then send them to university to study law. Some suggest

political science as a means of preparation for a life in politics, but a moment’s study of the professions of the country’s leaders, past and present, tells you that law is the real way to go. Breaking down laws into their constituent ambiguous words for purposes of perverting their original meaning is pretty much a degree in law summed up in a phrase.

By the time your tots have their law degrees, they will be ready to understand a variety of contracts and institutions that boggle the normal mind. NAFTA and the principle of trading environmental credits, for example. Why is it against free trade for Canadians to sell softwood lumber into the U.S., where lumber costs more to produce? Why is it Canada’s fault if American filmmakers lack the nationalism to make their movies at home? Why can an Alberta oil company feed a hundred dollars worth of beano to a herd of Ugandan bulls and be excused from a multi-million dollar retrofit of its tar sands plant?

These may seem like impenetrable Zen koans to the lowly likes of you and me, but our children with their law degrees will understand them. When they leap into politics, they will use the same kind of thinking to pass laws and trade agreements just as curious.

Canada may have stopped putting one religion ahead of another, may have extended the franchise to women and to First Nations people, may have, in 1968, stopped using race and colour as factors determining immigration eligibility, but that’s no reason why we can’t go on oppressing homosexuals. There’s certainly no political impediment, anyway. Very likely, the Supreme Court, that old killjoy, will rule that same-sex marriages are legal across the land. They’ll use the Charter of Rights as an authority, and, finally, even Alberta will be forced to “withstand it.” But it won’t be the fault of politics, as it is practised in this mighty land. We can go on having the same level of respect for politics that we’ve always had.

**Fred Stenson’s** new novel, *Lightning*, is in stores now.