

Don't expect to be wowed by the Dem debate

BY VIC BERARDELLI
SPECIAL TO THE BDN

When the Democrats hold their first debate on Oct. 13, only the personal traits of the two main participants will prevent it from reaching the lows of the recent GOP debates.

The problem is the television news organizations that have staged the debates. Their news divisions are not in-depth information sources. By its very nature, TV is a superficial medium of quick sound bites with no time to explain or probe. The people hired to present the product reflect that.

In the Republican debates, Fox and CNN anchors seeking quick 20-second video clips had an easy time of it because of the overpowering presence of Donald Trump. He is a creation of mass media. He shot from the hip to create sound bites and forced others to respond in kind, giving the networks the melodrama they sought.

The only strong moments directly addressing issues came when candidates stole the microphone to assert themselves and address them.

One came when Trump and

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Carly Fiorina got into a schoolyard shouting match over who had the worst business failures. Chris Christie grabbed the mic and told them both to shut up because the kitchen table issues affecting the average, middle-class bread earner were more important to address than which of the two had a better personal business career.

The other strong moment was when Trump got into it with Jeb Bush over speaking Spanish. Bush stammered through a demand for an apology to his Mexican wife, with whom he speaks the language at home, but never could explain why he did interviews in the language.

Marco Rubio grabbed the microphone and turned it into a brilliant policy statement that Bush missed. He noted that he grew up learning Spanish from his grandfather. If a segment of voters chose to get their primary information in that language, he said, "better they

hear it from me directly than to depend on the Univision interpreter."

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The debate format is flawed. If they were true debates, the moderators should have been unnoticeable in the process. They should have asked issues questions and gone around the stage for each candidate to answer so that voters could compare and contrast their various approaches to governing.

Instead, the moderators took about 25 percent of the air time, and they zeroed-in with individualized gotcha questions. Were we watching a media interview program or an inter-candidate political debate?

Credit our friends north of the border for getting it right. The three major Canadian party leaders are holding debates leading up to the Oct. 19 parliamentary elections.

The moderator was Toronto Globe and Mail Editor-in-Chief David Walmsley, a traditional journalist instead of media celebrity. He would bring up an issue, phrase the question to all three and then sit back and let them interact.

I watched one event from Calgary online and learned more about the real thinking on substantive issues of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper; New Democratic Party leader Thomas Mulcair; and Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau — son of the former prime minister — than I have as a U.S. citizen about those who want to be my president.

What passed for personal attacks were not the nasty insults we've seen here. They were more on the order of colorful turn of phrase to make a point.

For instance, Mulcair attacked the prime minister's overreliance on the energy sector to bail Canada out of recession and remarked, "Mr. Harper put all of his eggs in one basket and then dropped the basket."

When Trudeau described the NDP universal child care program as amounting to ineffective "puffs of smoke," Mulcair, hinting at Trudeau's support for marijuana decriminalization, merely replied wryly, "You know a little about that, don't you?"

There were few moments like that. Cute sound bites were rare. The three political leaders were there to inform, not entertain.

We could return civility and depth into our own American political debates. The first step would be to return the formats to issues instead of personalities, then assign real journalists instead of media egos to moderate.

Vic Berardelli is a retired political consultant and author of "The Politics Guy Campaign Tips — How to Win a Local Election." Now an independent unenrolled registered voter, he is a former Republican State Committeeman and former member of the National Board of the Republican Liberty Caucus.

Bangor launches vacant house registry

BY CHRISTOPHER BURNS
BDN STAFF

It's a story all too common in Maine cities. A property sits empty for a couple years and slowly it falls into disrepair — gutters begin to fall, the roof sinks under the weight of many winters and the yard fills with debris. Eventually, a squatter takes up residence and attracts police attention.

That's when police try to contact the owner to secure the property, to no avail.

Augusta City Councilor Darek Grant recounted this story earlier this week. After residents of Maine's capital complained about vacant properties, the City Council decided it was time to take action.

While vacant property is not a new issue, it is one that reached new heights following the 2007 subprime mortgage crisis. When homeowners found themselves faced with foreclosure, many simply walked away from their properties. As properties sat vacant, often for years, neighbors cried foul. It would fall to local governments to resolve these issues. Even eight years later, cities across the U.S. continue to grapple with these vacant properties.

With the homeowners out of the picture, out-of-state banks often took ownership of the properties but have not always been responsive to complaints, leaving cities with their hands tied. "I feel for the neighbors of these properties. People need to understand we're not the only ones dealing with this. It's a nationwide issue," Bangor Code Enforcement Officer Jeremy Martin said.

Fed up with vacant property festering across the city, Bangor in 2013 took a step toward bringing the problem under control by requiring owners



BDN FILE

An abandoned home at 82 Smith St. in Bangor as seen in August 2013. A neighbor, who declined to be identified, said the home was inhibiting his ability to sell a property on the street.

to register vacant properties with the city. Now other cities across Maine are following Bangor's lead to hold the owners of these properties responsible.

Bad neighbors

Nearly 24 percent of the 127,021 homes in foreclosure nationwide in the second quarter 2015 had been vacated by their owners, according to RealtyTrac, a California-based real estate information firm.

"This is part of the long tail of the recession," Daren Blomquist, vice president of RealtyTrac, said. "It's one of the biggest pains for a still-recovering housing market."

The RealtyTrac data, which is compiled using public foreclosure notices and vacancy information from the U.S. Postal Service, revealed that 37 percent of the 892 homes in active foreclosure in Maine during the second quarter of 2015 had been vacated by the owner. This is the fourth-highest rate in the nation, Jennifer Von Pohlmann, RealtyTrac public relations manager, said.

In Augusta, for instance, "some portion — approaching 50 percent — of [vacant] properties are in the foreclosure process," Matt Nazar, the city code enforcement officer, said.

But city officials often found that there was not "a reliable, local contact" who could take care of issues with the properties, so they often went unresolved.

"A lot of these out-of-state banks aren't being good neighbors and aren't taking care of their properties," Grant, the Augusta city councilor, said. "When it starts to affect other people's property, something needs to be done."

With frustration mounting over deteriorating property, the City Council formed an ad hoc Vacant Properties Committee about a year ago to craft a solution to the problem. What came out of the committee was a draft ordinance modeled after Bangor's own vacant property registry. It will come up for a final vote Thursday.

Such ordinances, most of which sprung up in response to the housing crisis, have proved popular across the country, with more than 550 cities adopting them, according to Dan Immergluck, professor in the School of City and Regional Planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Under the ordinance, if a property is left empty for more than 60 days, the owner must pay a fee — \$100 for individuals, \$200 for commercial entities — to register it with City Hall and provide a local contact

who can respond to problems as they arise, with exceptions carved out if the homeowner is deployed for military service or is a seasonal resident.

Owners who fail to register vacant property could be fined a civil penalty, under state law, from a minimum of \$100 to a maximum of \$2,500, with each day in violation considered a separate offense, Grant said.

Lack of resources

Two years after Bangor rolled out its vacant property registry, Martin still sees many local buildings that are vacant.

About 150 properties across the city are registered as vacant, although Martin expects that the actual number is likely much higher.

"We just don't have the resources to send someone around to look for vacant buildings," he said.

Other cities such as Augusta also lack the resources to take a full inventory of vacant properties, so they often rely on residents to bring these other properties to their attention.

Still, the registry has allowed Bangor to get a handle on the problem.

"We can now contact someone locally to get action taken on a specific property," Martin said. "We are seeing some light at the end of the tunnel."

Dress

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feminine or masculine behaviors reflect our larger society. Traditionally in the U.S., femininity has been associated — when associated with white women — with passivity, receptivity and emotion. Masculinity has been associated — when associated with white men — with assertiveness, strength of mind and reasoning.

It is sometimes argued that feminist goals have been accomplished and that we are now in a "post-feminist" age. A common response by students to issues raised by my course material is that "gender discrimination might have been true in the past, but things have changed."

When this remark is

made, I ask students to ask themselves two follow-up questions: "For whom?" and "How do I know?"

One student noted on our online discussion board a controversy over the dress code at her own high school: A male student who wore a dress to her high school graduation was told he was breaking the code because the dress was too revealing, though, as this student noted, it was no more revealing than other students' dresses.

This student went on to comment that "if a girl at the graduation would have worn a tie and slacks, I am sure that no one would have said anything."

While beauty norms differ from culture to culture and — as we observe at a place such as the University of Maine — even state to state, in my women's gender and sexuality class,

many female students share similar stories, such as the effort to fit beauty norms while in adolescence or the feeling that they are in competition with female friends.

As long as girls are taught that their self-worth resides in their appearance, fashion will cater to this value. As another student noted on our discussion board, "girls tend to wear more revealing clothes in the first place, which would explain why girls [rather than boys] are subjected to more condemning from schools."

That means the problem at Bangor High School is not the dress code, per se. It is the way the language of the code — "immodest," "provocative" — perpetuates the association between female bodies and a woman's value or self-worth.

While high schools should promote healthy behaviors, it is just as important to understand that an insistent focus on female bodies and their "distracting" potential is also a kind of unhealthiness.

A dress code that targets female students plays into social norms about masculinity and femininity in part by becoming an inviting target for students, whether they fit or strive to refashion gender norms.

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Gert Nesin snaps a photo during a bike ride while recovering from breast cancer. Nesin is an eighth-grade teacher at Leonard Middle School in Old Town.

Cancer

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As I started biking, I found many people who wanted to help — some bikers, some not. They offered advice, encouragement and company. They wanted me to journey safely and reach my goals. On many rides, I passed other bikers along the way, who nodded their encouragement. Occasionally, we'd stop and have a conversation. I often chose to bike by myself, but I never felt like I was in it alone.

The same was true with fighting cancer. Medical professionals and staff greeted me by name with a welcoming smile. They treated me, sympathized with me and laughed with me. Fellow cancer fighters inspired me. We all had our own stories, but with universal similarities. These people cherished every day, no matter where they were on their path.

Friends and acquaintances, some of whom I hadn't seen in years, offered support and assistance. Colleagues and students rallied around me. Family buoyed me during difficult times and cele-

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brated every small bit of good news.

I put my usual pride and independence in a back corner and accepted all the support that was offered.

Although only two years and a few months have passed since my cancer diagnosis, I feel like I have gained decades in wisdom and fortitude, gratitude and happiness. These are lessons that have become a part of me and how I approach life. It took several long, challenging bike rides and pushing through cancer treatment to help me realize and understand those life lessons.

Gert Nesin is an eighth-grade teacher at Leonard Middle School in Old Town.

Pope

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do not. Politicians will try to align themselves with Francis because he is more popular than them. It is a natural tendency but one most voters hopefully will see for the charade it is.

The simple fact is the Pope is not a Republican or a Democrat. He isn't pro-choice or a supporter of gay marriage. He believes mankind has a duty to steward the environ-

ment and that we have moral obligations to one another that may or may not be best addressed through government. In short, the Pope is Catholic. Whether he meets with Kim Davis or Philly prisoners, he does not really care what we think about him. He just wants us to pray for him, and we should.

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