

Bitches, jilted suitors and things best left unsaid

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A co-worker of mine keeps a "to do" list taped to her computer to remind her of ways to improve her life. Rule No. 1: "Keep 'inside voices' inside." As newspaper columnist and expolitico Norman Spector is learning for himself this week, that's a rule to live by.

Having no fear about speaking your mind has its charming aspects, as anyone who has met Spector in person will know. But sooner or later, it's going to trip you up big time.

Spector did a radio interview with Vancouver's Bill Good this week and let loose about Belinda Stronach, the Liberal MP whose personal life has seemingly captivated Canada's federal press gallery.

"Bitch is a word that I would use to describe someone like Belinda Stronach," said Spector in the now infamous exchange.

"You know, I'm not in politics, I can say it," Spector continued. "I think she's a bitch and I think that 90 per cent of men would probably say she's a bitch for the way she's broken up Tie Domi's home and the way she dumped Peter MacKay." Perhaps Spector has already offered this opinion in less public settings.

Having experienced the mixed blessing of his sharp and undiscerning intellect at my own dinner table a few years ago, I know the man doesn't shy away from putting forth an opinion.

But Bill Good's show was no dinner party. Spector was live on the radio when he made those comments about Stronach, speaking to however many radio listeners in the Lower Mainland and elsewhere who were tuned into the show. And that's just not the place to let your inside voice do the talking.

Comments like Spector's can be taken as insulting on so many fronts, and play into that tired old stereotype of the harlot luring good family men from their happy families.

But without getting into the right and wrong of any of that, Spector's biggest sin was to make his comments in a public arena.

He's free to think what he likes about Belinda Stronach, of course; so far, nobody has figured out a way to nail us for the thoughts in our head. But he said it out loud -- on the radio, no less. And that's a big mistake.

For the most part, I enjoy people who speak their minds. I like people who make their position clear, because at least that tells me who I'm dealing with.

If I were Stronach, I'd prefer to know right up front whether any national columnists thought of me as a "bitch" who'd wrecked Tie Domi's marriage, as that would let me put their comments about me as a politician into the right context.

But that's not to say I'd want to hear it on the radio, spoken as if it were truth. Spoken as if the subject should even be up for public discussion.

Sure, we're all free to our own opinions, but Spector of all people certainly ought to know that with such a right comes an equal measure of responsibility.

When one-time politico Mike Geoghegan mused in 2003 about B.C. MLA Jenny Kwan's race and looks as factors in her getting elected, those who knew Geoghegan understood he didn't really mean it to come out that way.

No such kind interpretation can be given to Spector's comments about Stronach. As a high-ranking adviser to former prime minister Brian Mulroney and B.C. premier Bill Bennett, Spector is no stranger to the concept of discretion.

In person, Spector is much nicer and way more fun than the average reader might anticipate based on his sombre analyses of world issues. But he's got a ruthless streak, as I witnessed for myself at that fateful dinner party, during which he raised one intense, controversial topic after another as dinnertable conversation.

Abortion. Religion. The Israeli- Palestinian conflict. All the subjects they teach you to avoid in Dinner Party 101. He talked so ferociously about capital punishment that one of the more sensitive dinner guests finally broke into tears, prompting Spector to wonder aloud whether that explained why he didn't get more return dinner invitations.

He'll certainly be off Stronach's invite list. But she'll survive his rude and ungentlemanly comments, and will likely endure far worse in years to come if she sticks it out in federal politics.

Being called a bitch by a guy Stronach is probably only barely aware of is no big deal in the grand scheme of things.

But Spector might want to do a little reflecting on the matter, and why it is he gave into such a childish bout of name-calling and judgment. He's a smart, worldly guy who ought to feel mortified at being caught out sounding like a scorned teenager spluttering out insults as the prom queen passes by.

Inside voices, Norman. Some thoughts just aren't meant to be shared.

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