[Admitting mistakes and defeat](https://nation.com.pk/19-Nov-2020/admitting-mistakes-and-defeat" \t "_new)

Atle Hetland November 19, 2020

President Donald Trump said in this year’s presidential election that he didn’t like to lose, probably because he felt he couldn’t really make mistakes and be at fault, and if so, he wouldn’t like to admit it and blame others around him. But then he did lose, and that even to someone he had nicknamed ‘Sleepy Joe’, now President-elect Joe Biden. And Trump has not yet admitted loss. In that sense, he keeps his word.

We laugh about such behaviour; we find it strange and crazy; and we may find it worrying and problematic—although we know that Trump, too, will throw in the towel and say that the game is over—for this time and this battle. Yes, he lost, but he managed to get a high number of votes, just slightly less than the winner. In no earlier American election have as many votes been cast. So, although Trump lost to Biden, he and Biden each had more votes than any earlier elected president. In other words, a fantastic achievement by both; rather than sulking, Trump should be proud of it.

And then, we all have a streak of Trump in us, at varying degrees. We like to win and be recognised, not lose, admit mistakes, defeat, having misunderstood, been ignorant, and so on. Sometimes we stretch the truth to make our CV look better—in order to get better jobs, better pay, buy a bigger house, and those things that can impress the neighbour and others we want to impress. There are bureaus and advisers who can help us create our image and style, sell our competence and skills, and gloss over our weaknesses and shortcomings. If we look in the mirror we may not quite recognise the person we see any more.

Maybe this is good for something, because a made-up image of ourselves is a good excuse if we fail; it wasn’t really we who lost, it was the marketing people. In Trump’s case, though, it was probably mainly he himself who created his own image, but he can still blame others, of course. We all have a streak of such behaviour. But as for Trump’s election loss, it was also a victory, as I mentioned above. Former President George W Bush congratulated Biden on his victory, and he said that Trump’s performance too was impressive. Why hasn’t Trump been able to see that? And why don’t we all more often see the positive in the negative? Not everyone can win, not all the time.

In politics, sports, art, science, commerce, trade, industry, and many other fields, there are always winners and losers. But the one who becomes number one will have many runners-up behind him or her, and they may indeed be very impressive and successful, too. In sports, for example, we know that in one event one person or team may win, in the next event, it may be somebody else. Venus and Serena Williams, the legendary tennis players, have shown that. They and other sports people have also reminded us that unimaginable numbers of gold medals in sports don’t tell all about the persons.

We know that in the civil service, it is rare that mistake is admitted. In my home country Norway, where I worked in the central civil service for some time, I remember that bosses didn’t admit mistakes and departments, directorates and so on portrayed themselves as always being right and defending decisions: Yes, I believe even when they knew they were wrong and had made mistakes. This is a problem with the civil service generally. Some control bodies can keep an eye on it, but never quite enough. Without control, decisions will be poorer and certainly less democratic. Trump might have become a good infallible civil servant, a job he never had—but he adopted the culture.

In research, it is common to admit mistakes and express uncertainty and doubt even when most evidence in a report supports its specific conclusions. The culture of universities and research institutes, and people with scientific minds, always emphasise the search for truth and knowledge, knowing that future studies may overthrow and add to current conclusions. When I worked at the University of Oslo, I recall that although academics could be arrogant and proud, there was always humbleness behind that appearance. Professional journalists, too, have much of this culture in their work.

We live in the year of the corona pandemic. Many politicians, doctors, international civil servants, administrators and others dealing with epidemics and forecasting risks, must feel they failed in their work since corona happened. Also, the military defence organisations failed, but have not admitted it. Some had warned about the likelihood of such an epidemic, but were not listened to. When the outbreaks happened, most countries took them seriously and implemented measures, often depending on what they could afford. Alas, America under Trump seems to have looked more to protecting the economy than the people, although no one would admit that. In America and other countries, epidemiologists and other advisers were not listened to by the politicians, or the politicians didn’t want to listen and take the lead, with the possibility of later blame. The wealthy and scientifically advanced Scandinavian country of Sweden seems to be one such country, but they don’t admit their mistake; they just put it off to future evaluations, after a vaccine has come and the situation is less dramatic. To everyone’s luck, and praise to the scientists, a vaccine seems to be available from the beginning of 2021.

Many times, we all try to talk us out of mistakes and defeat; the louder we speak and the better style we have the more certain and convincing we believe we are. Maybe we even begin to believe our own distorted analyses and fake news. I often find conservative economic politics to be a whole bunch of misunderstandings and hidden agendas benefiting the rich; I can’t quite see they believe much of it themselves. Yes, we all know that capitalism is only good if regulated by the people. We must all learn to see nuances and accept opposite views.

In my article today I ask why Trump has so great difficulties in admitting defeat. Yet, I can ask all of us the same. If we admit mistakes and defeat, we will learn and do better, and find new and better solutions. We must learn to be less dead-sure and categorical. Too often we think we are right, yes, even when we know we are not, and when we don’t know enough about alternatives and other ways.

I believe that sportsmen and women can teach us something about this. But schools and organisations have the main responsibility so that we can de-learn old habits and become open to admit mistakes and defeat. It is important for progress, indeed for our psychological and social well-being. If we can give more focus to this, then President Trump has reminded us of something good, as he did the opposite, in his waning days at the top of the world’s most powerful land.