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A rocker fit for a prime minister

Bono? Bah! Geldof? Get out of town! Punk legend Joe Strummer is the man who can show Chretien how to rock.

Warren Kinsella

The Ottawa Citizen

**Chris Bolin, National Post / London Calling:
Former Clash frontman Joe Strummer,
shown in Toronto last week, is the sort of
musician who actually has something to say.**

Joe Strummer addressed the microphone, and us. "This is for all the people looking to start a new life in places like Canada," he said. Strummer and his band, the Mescaleros, then launched into a pro-immigration song, Shaktar Donetsk. The tune is about a Macedonian refugee smuggled into Great Britain in the back of a truck. As was the case more than 20 years ago, when he fronted the Clash, Strummer sang every word like his life depended on it.

It was at that time -- about 9:30 on a sweltering night last week in HMV on Yonge Street in Toronto, where Strummer was giving a free concert -- that I turned to my fellow concert-goer, who happens to be a conservative. (He even held a Canadian Alliance membership card, briefly, but I will not embarrass him by identifying him publicly.) "That's the kind of musician the prime minister should listen to at G8 meetings," said I. "Not some aging, out-of-touch millionaire corporate rockers, like Bono or Bob Geldof."

I was being too critical, as usual, but my fit of pique was not entirely unwarranted. A few days back (you will recall from the dispatches of war correspondents stationed at the Genoa front), Prime Minister Jean Chretien met with U2's Bono, and Sir Bob Geldof, the former singer of the former Boomtown Rats. They talked about the retirement of Third World debt, which is a good idea, and which Mr. Chretien favours. But at the time, I found myself irritated that someone like Mr. Geldof -- who hasn't done anything noteworthy, politically or artistically, for more than a decade -- was able to shoehorn himself into a meeting with Canada's prime minister. Or that a gazillionaire like Bono is somehow seen as the vox populi of today's youth.

Unlike most politicians, the prime minister is honest enough to admit he is a fan of classical music, not rock and roll. And, unlike most politicians, he doesn't scramble to meet with pop stars in order that he can appear more youthful or hip. He isn't a phony. (That's one of the reasons I love the guy, which is a story for another day.)

But there are plenty of other politicians who would sell their mothers to capture a few precious minutes on MuchMusic. They and their staffs spend many hours trying to appeal to a youthful (and voting) demographic with pop culture references, displays of athletic prowess or consorting with rock stars. It's enough to make one barf, quite frankly, like the Sex Pistols did in their fabled

1978 visit to a Heathrow waiting room.

So, here's a suggestion. Instead of meeting with Bono and Geldof and their ilk -- who have a lot more in common with Bill Gates and Warren Buffet than the rest of us mere mortals -- why don't our politicians meet with some of the less-obvious artists, who are closer (physically and emotionally) to the social problems they sing about?

Take Public Enemy, for instance. Before much of rap descended into a sewer of misogyny and violence-worship, Public Enemy was one of the greatest rock and roll bands on the planet, and one of the most political. One of P.E.'s anthems, Fight the Power, should be required listening for every member of the House of Commons. Personally, I recommend placing the band's leader, Chuck D, alone in a room with the Alliance's Rob Anders, for 10 minutes. When little Robbie gets out (and if he's still standing), let's see if the CA ultra-rightist is still capable of insulting Nelson Mandela, shall we? (By the same measure, force all members of the Alliance to listen to the MC5's Kick Out the Jams and The Message, by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, on a continuous tape loop for one week. The country will benefit from the experience.)

MPs in so-called "family values" caucuses should share an afternoon touring a food bank with Britain's socialist folk-rocker, Billy Bragg, or Vancouver's punk rock veterans, D.O.A. A bit of "face time" with bands like the Queers, or Tom Sing if You're Glad to be Gay Robinson wouldn't hurt, either, before heading off to a pride parade. Meeting with a politician who wants to start a war? Bring along Rage Against the Machine, Midnight Oil or Belfast's Stiff Little Fingers to play Alternative Ulster. And so on and so on.

Most musicians, as they will be the first to tell you, are just musicians. If they had wanted a career in politics, they would have run for office. But occasionally, you will run across one or two rockers -- like Joe Strummer, there singing his heart out on a tiny stage in downtown Toronto in front of 400 of us lucky enough to get in -- who has something worthwhile to say about the way in which we do economics and politics.

These kinds of rockers may not move as many units as teenaged corporate ventures such as Britney Spears or N'Sync -- or oldsters like Bono or Geldof -- but that, to me, makes them a hell of a lot more endearing. And relevant.

Warren Kinsella is a Toronto lawyer and former campaign adviser to Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

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