

The authenticity of awkwardness

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GARY JOHNSON is the only politician I've ever considered working for. I saw him speak at a Cato Institute donor event a couple years back in Santa Barbara. I don't remember if he said so, but it was clear enough he was already running for president. His speech was by no means rousing; he is a slightly awkward speaker who seems sorry he is taking your time. He tossed surprisingly little ideological chum to Cato's wealthy financiers of libertarian ideology. He came off a practical man whose libertarian bent is almost entirely incidental. He would legalise marijuana not out of some deep philosophical conviction, but because he used to smoke a lot of it, knows it's not that big a deal and that its prohibition punishes perfectly decent people and stupidly wastes scarce resources. Harder drugs? He's not so sure, but less prison and more treatment seems like a good idea. He fought for school vouchers because he thought they would help. He would cut the defence budget because we can be just as safe or safer spending a lot less. Mostly he outlined his enviable record as governor of New Mexico—the many budgets he balanced, the astonishing number of bills he vetoed, the surplus he left behind.

The Cato crowd loved it. I loved it. I approached the group encircling him after his inspiringly boring talk fingering my business card, seriously considering offering my help to his incipient campaign, until at the last moment I came to my senses and remembered that I hate politics. Still, I was tempted. Gary Johnson almost seduced me into volunteering to change my life by his apparent inability to bullshit, by persuasively conveying the impression that politics is a distasteful vocation and he really would rather be scaling Annapurna, but that people with the ability to make government work better have an obligation to try, so he tries.

Which is why (in the spirit of fuller-than-necessary disclosure) I'm damn glad he finally made it into one of the GOP debates, made a bit of a splash with his cribbed poop joke, and is finally getting a little love from the press.

Lisa DePaulo's [excellent GQ profile](#) very nicely captures the offbeat quality of Mr Johnson's stealth charisma:

A few things you need to know up front about Gary Johnson. There is nothing he will not answer, nothing he will not share. For six straight days, we spent virtually every waking hour together, which might have had something to do with the fact that there wasn't another reporter within ten miles of the guy. Or that when you're polling in the low digits and your campaign fund is less than Mitt Romney's breakfast tab and your entourage is Brinck and Matt, you tend to be more forthcoming. But in fact, Johnson is fundamentally incapable of bullshitting, which is one of the many, many things that make him so unusual for a presidential candidate. (When a reporter asks him, after he gushes about how great New Hampshire voters are, if he says the same thing in Michigan, he replies, "No, Michigan's the worst.") He finds presidential politicking of the sort we've grown accustomed to—slick, scripted, focus-grouped, how-does-the-hair-look—to be "absolutely phony."

And there's this:

It is hard to spend time with Gary Johnson without wondering, every step of the way: WHY? Why bother? He doesn't particularly crave attention. He doesn't have any ulterior motives for, say, the vice presidency or a cabinet post. He's a pro-choice, pro-immigration Republican who wants to legalize pot, for chrissake. ...

Gary will tell you it's because he believes in what he believes in and that he really thinks he can win. He games it out for me: He just needs to catch on like he did in New Mexico; he's like most of America, which is to say fiscally conservative and socially liberal; the majority of Republicans agree with him on social issues, even though they are not the ones who vote in primaries, yet; the other ones will cancel each other out; and so on. But the real question might be, why not? Perhaps the man just has an extraordinary bucket list: Start a business from scratch, climb Mount Everest, run for president...

The truly strange thing about Mr Johnson, qua politician, is his *authenticity*. But as Andrew Potter argues in his fascinating book "[The Authenticity Hoax](#)", authenticity has lately acquired scare quotes, has become simply another marketing ploy. Rehabbed exposed brick is "authentic". Buying your certified organic mangoes out of wooden crates in shops with buffed concrete floors is "authentic". In American politics "authenticity" is a put-on populism, a regular-joe, bible-thumping bonhomie, an American flag lapel-pin persona. Rick Perry's drawling, alpha-male Christ-love is fearsomely "authentic". That's his supposed advantage. But Gary Johnson's authenticity seems, well, authentic. The media especially doesn't know what to do with Mr Johnson and his indifference to optics, other than to ignore it. Because how can a man dispositionally allergic to pandering get ahead in politics? Yet his anti-charismatic charm seems to have worked in New Mexico. I know it has worked on me. I very much doubt Mr Johnson will get anywhere near the Republican

nomination. But if he stays in the debates and keeps getting attention from the press, I think a lot of people are going find themselves surprised by the way the governor's guileless can-do competence sneaks up on them.