

# Random Impressions

Brief items from Radical Digressions – [www.diemer.ca](http://www.diemer.ca)

~ Ulli Diemer ~

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## Psychotherapist out of touch

It would be difficult to imagine advice for children and parents more damaging than that offered by psychotherapist Darlene Hall in a recent article in the Globe and Mail.

According to Ms Hall, “enlightened parents” who want to reduce “childhood victimization” should stop hugging or touching their children unless they have first asked for and received permission to do so from the child. The offer of a parental hug or touch “should be given and articulated to the child in a clear and direct manner by the adult.” If touching the child is unavoidable, as in bathing or giving medicine, then the parent is to explain “why they need to touch the child, and they should continue to talk to the child as the activity unfolds.”

What a perfect recipe for raising children to be self-conscious and uncomfortable about their bodies, about touching, and about being touched! In Ms Hall’s emotionally constipated vision of family life, there appears to be no room for spontaneous physical expressions of affection. Touching one’s own child is an inherently suspect activity, never to be engaged in without prior discussion.

Someone needs to explain to Ms Hall that spontaneous touching and hugging are natural behaviour all over the world among people who like or love each other. They play a crucial role in developing a child’s sense of being loved and secure. Normal parents don’t ask a crying toddler “Would it be all right with you if I were to pick you up and comfort you?”

The best that can be said for Ms Hall’s advice is that it would be sure to generate plenty of additional business for “experts” on family problems like herself.

## Yes means no?

Betty Disero and Beverley Richardson, in a recent letter to the editor, profess support for the principle that “No Means No” and “Yes Means Yes”. However, after paying lip service to this admirably clear rule, they reveal that what they actually support is the position that “Yes means No”.

Adopting a line of argument which is rapidly gaining popularity among those who wish to use society’s desire to prevent assault as a cover for legislating their own brand of morality, Disero and Richardson claim that “Yes” means “No” if one or both of the parties are “under the influence of alcohol”. According to this point of view, drinking and sex should be equated with drinking and driving, and the law should view both with equal severity.

Those who equate these situations betray their incomprehension of what the issue of consent is all about. No one, whatever their state of sobriety, wishes to hit by a car, whether it is driven by a drunk driver or by a sober one. People who drive when intoxicated inflict a considerable risk of such collisions on others, and that is why we as a society refuse to allow people to drive after they have been drinking. The question of consent never arises, because being run into by a drunk driver is never a consensual act.

However, people in varying stages of sobriety do willingly engage in sex. Individuals who are too intoxicated to drive safely are still quite capable of desiring sex, of consenting to sex, and of participating in sexual activity. It may offend the sensibilities of the new puritans, but some people actually find that they desire and enjoy sex more when they have been drinking or taking certain drugs. This should not be a matter for the law.

It should also not be the business of the law to legislate a paternalistic double standard by holding that a woman is no longer capable of distinguishing between “Yes” and “No” if she

has been drinking, while a man remains capable of telling the difference when he has been drinking. There may be times when there is guilt or regret afterwards about the decision to engage in sex, but if there has been no coercion, that too should not be a matter for the law. Justice Minister Campbell has therefore acted correctly in removing the “intoxication” provision from Bill C-49.

The business of the law should be to make it clear that “No” means “No” and that society will not tolerate the use of force or coercion to obtain sex. Anyone who can’t tell the difference between “Yes” and “No” is part of the problem.

### **Things are good for everyone in Kyrgyzstan — except the vast majority**

No doubt things look pretty rosy from the salad bars of the “upscale restaurants” in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where foreign journalists like Geoffrey York rub shoulders with “swarms of Western advisers and consultants” (Obscure little country becomes big success).

Too bad it didn’t occur to Mr. York to find out how the people of Kyrgyzstan are faring under the marvellous “market reforms” which have turned the country into “the darling of the world’s economic reformers”.

Had he troubled to do so, he might have discovered that while Kyrgyzstan is being “flooded with planeloads of foreign experts who have lavished praise on its reformist government and its liberalized economy”, the income and living standards of the vast majority of the population have dropped, unemployment has risen dramatically, average life expectancy has fallen, and rural poverty has increased.

Mr. York’s sole allusion to these unfortunate side-effects of the “model” free market miracle which has foreign investors drooling is to observe that “the reforms have been slow to bring benefits to the ordinary people of the country.”

In plain language, most people are worse off than they were before. Some “model”. Some “big success”.

March 22, 1995

### **The Star’s biased reporting**

According to the Toronto Star, residents of Al Leach’s riding attending a public meeting in their own riding are “party crashers”, while Tories brought in “from around the province” are there to “bolster” the event.

George Orwell would be impressed. Residents of the community are illegitimate intruders at a public meeting to discuss the future of their community. Outsiders brought in to tell them that resistance is futile are the forces of legitimacy.

Clearly the Star’s journalistic standards have crashed beyond any possibility of bolstering.

February 20, 1997

## The meaning of democracy

The Globe and Mail's denunciation of the Day of Action protest as a violation of democracy makes perfect sense – as long as one understands the special way the Globe defines “democracy”.

“Democracy” according to this definition is a safe election every four years or so in which voters choose between corporate-dominated parties whose policies are virtually indistinguishable on all fundamental issues.

“Democratic government” in this context means rule by a political party, elected by a minority of the electorate, which in office breaks many of the major promises it made during the election campaign. The role of the vast majority of the population in this version of “democracy” is to remain passive and not interfere.

What “democracy” definitely does not mean, when the Globe uses the term, is the active involvement of the majority of the population in governing society to ensure that economic and social policy serve the needs and interests of the majority rather than a small wealthy elite.

The Globe is quite right. Popular protests like the Days of Action are a threat to its version of “democracy”.

October 23, 1996

## Polluted logic

The business of allowing polluters to buy their way out of complying with the law is an innovation with vast untapped potential. (Article: Ontario Hydro sells pollution credits to Connecticut company).

For example, law-abiding drivers could sell their unused speeding and dangerous driving credits to drivers who want to be able to hit the road without having to worry about speed limits or the niceties of the Highway Traffic Act.

Agribusiness companies whose products contain pesticide concentrations exceeding those permitted by law could buy surplus pesticide contamination credits from organic farmers.

In the spirit of this new trend, I am now ready to entertain bids for my unused burglary and armed robbery credits from individuals who have exhausted their own quotas in the course of their trade. Cash only, please.

Let the free market rule!

May 10, 1998

## Interventions

Globe and Mail columnist Marcus Gee is off base in citing East Timor as an example of a civil conflict in which the Western powers failed to intervene.

First of all, Indonesia's attack on East Timor was in no way a civil war. It was an invasion, an act of military aggression across an international border, comparable to Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Further, Gee is completely wrong in suggesting that the United States and its allies failed to intervene when Indonesia invaded East Timor. On the contrary, the United States intervened massively – on the side of Indonesia. The U.S. supplied the bulk of the weaponry used by the Indonesian military, even expediting additional shipments of ammunition and weapons to help crush the unexpectedly vigorous East Timorese resistance. Throughout, the U.S. provided diplomatic cover at the United Nations and elsewhere to protect the Suharto dictatorship from international sanctions.

March 26, 1999

## The myth of a free market in publishing and high-tech

The two readers of Computing Canada who wrote to complain about Bill C-55 would have done well to familiarize themselves with the facts before sending off such spectacularly ill-informed letters.

Contrary to what Ryan Jamieson imagines, Bill C-55 has nothing in it to “impose huge cross-border penalties on U.S. magazines entering Canada.” The legislation has no provisions whatever affecting the sale of foreign publications, U.S. or otherwise: they would continue to be available on Canadian newsstands exactly as they are now.

Bill C-55 deals with advertising services: ads placed in American split-run magazines by Canadian advertisers would draw tax penalties. This is standard anti-dumping legislation, variants of which are used by many countries, notably the U.S., to prevent unfair competition. Split-runs are a classic example of dumping in that they can be produced without having to hire staff to produce the content, because the content is picked up free of charge from the U.S. edition. This means they can sell ad space far below normal market rates and wipe out Canadian magazines by eliminating their source of revenue.

Mr. Jamieson further betrays his lack of knowledge with his absurd claim that the IT industry flourished “because of a free-market environment”. He could not possibly be more wrong. The high-tech industries, in the U.S. in particular, owe their very existence to massive levels of government subsidies and intervention. The Internet, for example, was created and developed by the U.S. military in co-operation with government-funded universities. It was turned over to the “free market” only after more than 25 years of publicly-funded work had made it commercially viable. The electronics, semi-conductor, and computer industries, the communications industry, the aviation industry, the biotechnology sector – all the important high-tech sectors in the U.S. – have been developed through huge, and continuing, public subsidies backed by extremely aggressive protectionist legislation.

March 30, 1999

## **Saddam's Alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Why doesn't Saddam use his weapons now [March 2003] if he really has them?

The United States justifies its unilateral decision to go to war with the claim that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction which could it use to attack the US.

The US claims that the threat from these weapons is so great, and so imminent, that the inspections process backed by most United Nations members has to be abruptly terminated so the US can launch an immediate attack on Iraq.

Under these circumstances, Saddam Hussein, and the Iraqi leadership, can have no possible illusions about the fact that an American attack is about to begin and that they have little or no chance of surviving it.

If Saddam Hussein really possesses these alleged weapons of mass destruction, would it not be logical, from his point of view, to launch them against the United States right away, today, while he is still alive and still able to use them? Knowing he is about to be annihilated, why would he possibly hold back from using them now?

There is only one logical explanation: that he does not in fact possess the weapons capability that the US claims he does. And if this is so, then many thousands of Iraqi will die because of an utterly unnecessary war, a war launched on a pretext that is clearly false. Such a war would be a crime against humanity.

March 18, 2003

## **The reliable tyrant**

The Bush administration is starting to look a bit desperate as it seeks a way out of the mess it created with its invasion and occupation of Iraq. The weapons of mass destruction that were supposedly the reason for the war are nowhere to be found, and the Iraqis are acting anything but grateful for their 'liberation'.

Fortunately the solution to the whole debacle is within the Americans' grasp.

All they need do is release Saddam Hussein from custody and put him back in power. Given a second chance, he'll soon crush the opposition and restore order. He's got the credentials and the track record for the job, if anybody does. It's true that he's a truly nasty piece of work, but his methods, including mass murder and torture, didn't stop the U.S. from supporting him enthusiastically throughout the 1980s, the period of his greatest crimes. It was only when he made the mistake of disobeying the U.S. that he became an enemy.

No doubt a deal could be worked out. Saddam would be happy to return to power in exchange for an undertaking to follow orders. And the U.S. could withdraw its troops, secure in the knowledge that a reliable tyrant will maintain order and keep the oil flowing.

April 8, 2004

## Monogamous Voles

*Re: Could Voles Help Create The Perfect Husband? (article in the Globe and Mail, June 17, 2004):*

If only a tiny minority of mammals are monogamous, then presumably non-monogamous behaviour offers an evolutionary advantage.

In that case, instead of searching for a genetic fix to make promiscuous humans monogamous, wouldn't it be more useful if the researchers at Emory University tried to find a way to cure the minority who suffer from monogamous tendencies?

June 17, 2004

## The "cost" of software piracy

It may be the job of the software industry's PR people to pump out figures designed to make software piracy seem like a huge drain on the economy. But why do the media have to uncritically parrot their highly suspect statistics without scrutinizing them to ask how valid they are?

The enormous dollar amounts the industry throws around in its PR campaigns are purely imaginary. These numbers – \$1.1 billion a year is what their latest press release claims – are nothing but guesses, guesses based on absurd – and demonstrably false – assumptions.

In their fantasy world, everyone who ever tries out a piece of software they haven't bought is depriving the industry of the full retail price of that software. In the real world, people often try out software to see if it's worth buying. Since the industry has decided, in its greed, to make it impossible to 'test drive' a program without first buying it, and since users know that software is often buggy and doesn't function as advertised, people understandably circumvent the rules in order to check out the true merits of a particular program. Often what happens is that they try it out, find it doesn't meet their needs, and delete it. How different is that from test driving a car? Does the automobile industry spend its time whining about how much money they lose to 'car pirates' who test drive a car and then decide not to buy it?

Even more ridiculous than the industry's grossly inflated numbers is their claim that the value of pirated software, whatever the true amount is, is money that is "lost" to "the economy". The plain fact is that not one cent of it is "lost". Instead of being spent on software, that money is simply spent on something else. That something else might be a competing product, or it might be rent, or books, or beer. But certainly it is spent on something, and it ends up circulating in the economy in just the same way as money spent on software does. It may be a loss to Bill Gates and his cohorts, but a loss to the economy it isn't.

November 16, 2005

## Were Marx's principles only skin deep?

A British dermatologist has managed to get himself worldwide publicity with an article suggesting that Karl Marx's painful skin condition may have caused him to say all those mean things about capitalism.

"Skin disease causes tremendous upset," said Prof. Sam Shuster. "He [Marx] was writing his big works like *Das Kapital* at a time when the disease was particularly bad and it was pretty clear that he was not in the best of moods when he was writing it." According to Prof. Shuster, the disease, hidradenitis (known as 'carbuncles' in Marx's time), "greatly reduced his self-esteem. This explains his self-loathing and alienation, a response reflected by the alienation Marx developed in his writing."

That must have been quite the nasty skin condition, to have kept Marx in an uncompromisingly revolutionary frame of mind from the time of his 1844 manuscripts right up to his death in 1883.

Imagine how differently everything could have turned out if Prof. Shuster had been able to hop on a time machine and travel back in time to cure Marx of his skin ailment. Cured, too, of his hatred of oppression and injustice, Marx would then have felt no need to proclaim "workers of all lands, unite," and or to imagine a future society governed by the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Instead, Marx and his life-long collaborator Friedrich Engels could have poured their energy into penning upbeat musicals extolling the lives of the wealthy – imagine such hits as *Les Comfortables* or *Adam Smith, Superstar*, or *The Sound of Money* – and made a fortune.

Pity.

October 31, 2007

## Nothing personal, just business

"A street entrepreneur or a life-destroying psychopath?" asks a review of the film *American Gangster*, which portrays the life of drug kingpin Frank Lucas.

How is that an either-or choice?

*The Corporation*, the film by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott and Joel Bakan, demonstrates that the capitalist corporation "fully meets the diagnostic criteria of a 'psychopath.'" As they put it, "the operational principles of the corporation give it a highly anti-social 'personality': it is self-interested, inherently amoral, callous and deceitful; it breaches social and legal standards to get its way; it does not suffer from guilt, yet it can mimic the human qualities of empathy, caring and altruism."

Or, as Howard Scott so nicely put it, "a criminal is a person with predatory instincts who has not sufficient capital to form a corporation." In a society whose dominant value system says that the only thing that matters is to get as much for yourself as possible, crime is an alternative form of entrepreneurship.

November 2, 2007



## **Bad news: Unemployment is down and wages are up**

Normally, the corporate media are violently allergic to any suggestion that class conflict exists at all, let alone that it is fundamental to our capitalist economic system. However, in the business news one is more likely to encounter plain speaking.

A case in point is the Globe and Mail's report on the fears and upset that October's economic data have sparked among economic forecasters and currency traders. The reasons for their worries? A fall in the unemployment rate, an increase in real wages, and a climb in the value of the Canadian dollar.

The data show that, during the month of October 2006, "the Canadian economy churned out 63,000 jobs, roughly five times the number that had been expected. The jobless rate in Canada fell to a 33-year low of 5.8 per cent, from 5.9 per cent in September, and the employment rate for adult women hit record levels."

According to the Globe, currency traders had been hoping for action by the Bank of Canada to counteract these trends. "Instead, we get another blowout, and the jobless rate at a 33-year-low, and the average wage of a permanent employee is up 4.2 per cent and accelerating," said David Watt, senior currency strategist at RBC Capital Markets. "You're sitting in the market looking at this, and you're like, there is absolutely nothing they can do to stop this."

That's right: they're upset because unemployment down slightly and wages are up a little, and nothing is being done to stop it. If working people are better off, even only slightly, it's bad news.

November 2, 2007

## Margaret Somerville's yucky logic

Margaret Somerville is the founding director of the Centre for Medicine, Ethics and the Law at McGill University in Montreal. Someone, you might expect, who would bring sophisticated reasoning and careful logic to the analysis of morally complex issues.

Not so, it seems, when it comes to the issues on which Dr. Somerville has a strong personal bias. She threw herself into the battle against gay marriage, arguing that same-sex marriages are 'unnatural' because couples of the same sex can't produce children 'naturally'. Numerous critics have made the same obvious point: by this criterion, straight couples who are infertile or past childbearing age are also 'unnatural'. And by what logic are children produced by artificial insemination 'natural' in a heterosexual marriage, but 'unnatural' in a lesbian relationship? Dr. Somerville has no reply, but keeps on repeating the same 'unnatural' argument at every opportunity nonetheless.

This past week, on the twentieth anniversary of the Supreme Court's Morgentaler decision invalidating the existing abortion law, Dr. Somerville has offered up her thoughts on abortion, which she also opposes. Dr. Somerville claims that the 'yuck reaction' some people feel when contemplating abortion is evidence that abortion violates our innate "moral instinct".

Now personally, I find that my 'yuck reaction' is triggered when I picture almost any medical-surgical procedure, be it brain surgery, an eye operation, or amputating a gangrenous toe. I interpret this not as a message from my deepest moral instincts, but as evidence of my personal squeamishness about blood and sharp objects. I wouldn't consider my reaction to the 'yuckiness' of a medically appropriate procedure as an argument for banning it.

This is not to say that abortion is a trivial matter. Deciding whether to continue or terminate a pregnancy is no doubt a difficult decision for many women. It is one that they should be able to make on the basis of what is right for them, not on the basis of whether Margaret Somerville thinks it's yucky.

January 27, 2008

## Comparing evils

Senator Romeo Dallaire told a Parliamentary committee yesterday that, “The minute you start playing with human rights, with conventions, with civil liberties, in order to say that you’re doing it to protect yourself and you are going against those rights and conventions, you are no better than the guy who doesn’t believe in them at all.”

Predictably, Conservative MP Jason Kenney professed shock at the idea that anyone could compare the methods used by the U.S. in the name of “combatting terrorism” with the methods used by “the terrorists”. According to Mr. Kenney, you can’t compare U.S. actions in the “war against terrorism” with al-Qaeda using “a 14-year-old girl with Down’s syndrome” as a suicide bomber.

On one level, he is correct to say you can’t compare them, though not in the way he thinks. The “girl with Down’s syndrome” claim was exposed as a fabrication within days, and quickly dropped by U.S. authorities. The bloody excesses of the U.S. occupation forces in Iraq, on the other hand, such as the rape and murder of a 14-year-old girl by U.S. soldiers, are well documented facts. You can’t compare fabrications with facts.

On a broader level, Mr. Kenney is wrong in saying that you can’t compare U.S. behaviour with the behaviour of “people who blow up children”. On the contrary, it is an indisputable fact that U.S. bombs have blown up far more Iraqi children than al-Qaeda’s bombs. Al-Qaeda is willing to kill large numbers of innocent people, including children, in pursuit of its goals, and the U.S. is willing to kill large numbers of innocent people, including children, in pursuit of its goals. By what standard of morality are they not morally equivalent?

May 14, 2008

## The single-state solution

Globe and Mail columnist Marcus Gee dismisses the growing movement for a single democratic secular state encompassing Israel and Palestine with the claim that “Jews could never feel safe in a country where they were a minority. Many will simply leave.”

Has it escaped his notice that most Jews choose to live in countries where they are a minority? Any Jew anywhere in the world is free to fly to Tel Aviv and instantly claim Israeli citizenship. Yet despite Israel’s strenuous efforts to encourage Jewish immigration, very few Jews make this choice. Most of the world’s Jews clearly prefer to be citizens of secular states like Canada, the United States, Britain, France, and Argentina, even though they are a minority in those countries.

In fact, some 700,000 Israeli Jews, around 13% of Israel’s Jewish population, have left Israel – to move to countries where they are in the minority. More than 100,000 Jews who came to Israel from the former Soviet Union have chosen to return to Russia or the Ukraine.

Indeed, the times have changed so dramatically that each year thousands of Israelis, many of them the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, are moving to Germany and taking out German citizenship. Who would ever have predicted this? Who would have thought sixty years ago that Europe, with its history of war and hatred, would one day be transformed into a single community in which long-time enemies would live together in peace? Yet it happened in Europe – and it can happen in the Middle East.

Bringing about a single secular state in which Jews and Palestinians have equal rights will not be easy, but ultimately it is the only solution to the conflict. A state based on respect for the human rights of all its citizens is a better safeguard against anti-Semitism and racism than one based on ethnic nationalism and inequality.

May 16, 2008

## Lady Martha's story

Normally, I delete the spam that gets past the filter into my mailbox as quickly as anyone. Tempting though it might be to realize my innermost fantasies of losing weight and getting a degree in any field I choose while having my breasts augmented and my penis enlarged, it never quite seems like the right moment to go for it.

But I do have a sneaking fondness for those occasional carefully crafted letters that tell a complete and compelling story. Some of these are almost works of literature, little Chekovian gems in their own way. If Alice Munro fell on hard times and had to support herself writing spam, these are the stories she would tell to get her hands on our banking information.

I recently received one from a certain Lady Martha. She plunges directly into her story:

“Here writes Lady Martha Stirling, suffering from cancerous ailment. I am married to Engineer Dennis Stirling an Englishman who is dead.” You can read her whole story here.

Lady Martha is a woman I feel an instant bond with. Burdened though she is with her own woes – she has had a stroke, her doctor has told her she has “limited days to live due to the cancerous problems”, and of course there is the unfortunate circumstance of the husband who is an Englishman who is dead – she nevertheless has made the time to do something very special for me.

I think what I like about Lady Martha is that she is interested in the good in me, not the bad. Whereas most spam is designed to prey on my weaknesses – my greedy desire to make a quick killing on the stock market, my insecurities about my penis, breasts, weight, and lack of education – Lady Martha has singled me out because she knows I am a good person. She has chosen me because she knows she can trust me to use the “10 Million Great Britain Pounds Sterling” she is prepared to deposit in my bank account not for my own selfish purposes, but “to fund the upkeep of widows, widowers, orphans, destitute, the down-trodden, physically challenged children, barren-women and persons who prove to be genuinely handicapped financially.”

I almost think that it's this blog that has finally made people far and wide realize what a kind and trustworthy soul I am. How else to explain the fact that five days after Lady Martha's letter arrived, I received, out of the blue, a very similar letter from one Lady Karen, who is also “married to an English man who is dead”. Her story is if anything even more tragic: her husband “died in a train bomb blast in Spain when he was going for his medical check up”, and sadly she too is suffering from “cancerous problems”. You can read her whole story here.

Lady Karen will be depositing 6 million Great British Pounds in my bank account. She says that her goal is “to put a smile on the face of the less privileged.”

And you know, she is doing just that.

June 12, 2008

## **Have you heard the one about the negligent official and the obtuse columnist?**

The newspaper columnist Christie Blatchford, who can reliably be counted on to miss the point whenever ethical issues arise, has come rushing to the defense of Gerry Ritz, the beleaguered Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. Mr. Ritz has been amusing himself by cracking jokes about the recent listeria outbreak, which has killed 19 people to date.

According to Ms Blatchford, black humour is a perfectly normal response to grim situations, so we should lay off Mr. Ritz.

Well, yes, Christie, it is normal, and normally such jokes, told in private, wouldn't be a big deal. But here's the difference: Gerry Ritz and his cabinet colleagues were responsible for ensuring the safety of Canada's food production system, and they failed to do so. On the contrary, they pushed through changes which compromised the safety of the system, over the objections of their own experts.

When people die as a consequence of your failures, joking about it just isn't on. A pilot who makes a fatal mistake and crashes the plane doesn't stand in front of the cameras and crack jokes while behind him the corpses of his passengers are being dragged off the tarmac. And a blundering cabinet minister whose government presided over a disaster it was responsible for preventing shouldn't be telling jokes about the resulting deaths while the bodies of the victims are being buried.

September 21, 2008

## **Super Salad**

The customer in line in front of me is ordering the lunch special.

Server: "Super-Salad?"

Customer: "Sounds good."

Server: "Super-Salad?"

Customer: "Yes, sure."

Server: "But do you want the Super-Salad?"

Customer: "What's in the Super-Salad?"

Server: "It's either a bowl of soup, or a salad."

Ah!

Customer: "What kind of soup is it?"

Mercifully, another server is ready to take my order. Coffee, with milk.

March 18, 2010

## Are the police doing their job?

It was good to see Naomi Klein tearing into the Toronto police for their violence and abuse of power at the recent G20 summit in Toronto. However, I can't agree with her at all when she tells the police to "do your goddamned job".

Fact is, the police ARE doing their job.

Their job is to protect the wealth and power of the ruling elite against any challenge. That involves – among other things – intimidating and suppressing anyone who is not respectful and subservient.

Upholding law and order in a society whose 'order' and legal system are based on inequality and oppression depends, first, on an ideological system that tries to make people believe capitalism is good or at least inevitable, and second, on using violence or the threat of violence to deter challenges to the power of the powerful.

The police are the enforcers of the capitalist system. No need to tell them to do their jobs – they're already doing them, and they'll keep on doing them as long as capitalism survives.

July 6, 2010

## How to get the answers you want

*The Ontario government appointed a high-profile banker, Don Drummond, to come up with recommendations about how the government should deal with difficult economic times. The results were predictable....*

The Drummond report is a typical instance of how to make sure you get the wrong answers by asking the wrong questions and appointing the wrong person to answer them.

Step 1: The government rigs the game by stipulating that taxing corporations and the rich must not even be discussed.

Step 2: It appoints a wealthy banker who has no knowledge of what life is like for ordinary people to write a report impacting the lives of millions of people.

Presto! You get the predictable result: a report that proposes across-the-board cuts to services for working people and the poor, while the wealthy are left free to keep getting wealthier.

February 17, 2012

## Whose problem?

*A headline on an article about interactions between the police and mentally ill people stated that "Dealing with mentally ill a top concern for cops." I wrote a short letter to the editor in response:*

The headline on the March 26 story on police and the mentally ill seems to have it backwards. Given the number of mentally ill people shot by police, shouldn't that read "Dealing with cops a top concern for the mentally ill"?

March 27, 2014

## **Letter to the editor: Diminishing residential schools abuse?**

Two articles in Saturday's Star related the stories of people who survived historical horrors. The one, about two Holocaust survivors, the Immerglucks, states plainly that "both suffered tremendous loss". The other, about residential school survivor Michael Cachagee, states that "he says he suffered physical, sexual and emotional abuse".

In labelling the abuse suffered by Cachagee as merely something that he "says" happened, the story serves to diminish and call into question the suffering Cachagee and thousands of other students experienced in the Indian residential schools. The Residential Schools Inquiry collected testimony from 38,000 survivors. Isn't it time to stop referring to the abuse not as something they "say" happened, but as something that happened?

Miriam Garfinkle  
Ulli Diemer  
June 28, 2014

## **The biggest threat to a free society is freedom of speech, says Canada's Public Safety Minister**

*Testifying at a Parliamentary hearing into the Conservative government's proposed new "anti-terror" legislation, which will give the government sweeping new powers to spy on the population and designate political opposition as a danger to national security, Canada's "Public Safety" Minister Steven Blaney said that freedom of speech in Germany led to the Holocaust. My comment:*

Who knew? The Nazi Holocaust, according to Public Safety Minister Steven Blaney, could have been prevented if only Germany hadn't suffered from an excess of freedom of speech.

So much for the established historical view, according to which Germany was set on the road to totalitarian horror by a right-wing government which passed a series of emergency laws that abolished freedom of speech, outlawed all opposition, jailed critics, and set up a secret police apparatus to spy on the entire population, all in the name of "public safety."

Clearly we should all embrace the government's new "anti-terror" legislation. With people like Steven Blaney, Peter MacKay, and Stephen Harper deciding how much freedom we are allowed to have, what could possibly go wrong?

March 11, 2015



## A quick note on neoliberalism and state capitalism

*Nick Fillmore wrote a short piece recently explaining neo-liberalism to people who are unfamiliar with the term. He sketches the basic ideology, the introduction of neo-liberal reforms under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and the increasing power of institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and U.S. Treasury, accompanied by the rise of so-called trade agreements and increasing inequality. I wrote a quick note commenting on his overview:*

Thanks for this post, Nick. There are three things I would add:

1) The economic system you describe is Capitalism. From Day One, capitalism has always been based on exploitation of working people, private appropriation of common resources, and all the other things you describe.

2) The key to understanding neo-liberalism, in my opinion, is power, not ideology. Capitalists have always sought to get everything they possibly can, while resisting any controls on capital and its activities. They have been constrained, historically, to the extent that working people have been able to fight back and impose some controls on capital and some rights for working people. The current neo-liberal stage of capitalism is defined by capital's success in increasing its power, and the corresponding loss of power by working people to assert their interests.

3) Neo-liberalism is actually a form of state capitalism, marked by ever-increasing government intervention and state spending. The fairy tales about "free markets," "liberalization," "down-sizing government," and so on, are just that, fairy tales. Under neo-liberal regimes, beginning with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, state spending has increased significantly. It's true that social spending, on health care, welfare, environmental protection and so on, has been slashed, but spending on the military and wars, "national security," police, corporate subsidies, and corporate bailouts, have grown and grown.

June 2, 2015

### Neoliberal house of horrors

**"If Hitchcock had made a film about neoliberal economics, the Chicago School of Economics would be the Bates Motel, Milton Friedman would be the demented proprietor, and Friedrich Hayek would be the dead mother in the attic."**

**- Ulli Diemer**

**[www.connexions.org](http://www.connexions.org) - Information to change the world**

## Those devious foreigners

The U.S. media (with help from the U.S. Navy PR department) has exposed another sneaky trick invented by wily Chinese. It seems that they may be hiding their submarines under the sea. “Why didn’t we think of that?” appears to be the question the always-probing American media are asking.

The story goes on to relate that the equally underhanded Russians are using the same trick. They’ve apparently hidden their submarines under the sea as well, in the coastal waters off Russia.

Near the end of the article, one other detail is mentioned in passing. “Since submarines can often avoid detection, they are less vulnerable to a first-strike attack than land-based intercontinental missiles or nuclear bombers.” Now why would China and Russia be worried about a first-strike attack? Could it have anything to do with the fact that the United States has explicitly stated that it “reserves the right to use” nuclear weapons first in the case of conflict – including a conflict that it has itself initiated? Unsurprisingly, that is a question the U.S. media appear to be incapable of asking.

June 22, 2015



## Potential Conservative Environment Minister?

It’s a pity that the Conservative candidate caught peeing into a customer’s coffee cup has resigned. He’d make a perfect Environment Minister in the Harper government. What he did in one kitchen is pretty much exactly what the Conservatives have allowed corporations to do to lakes and rivers across the country.

September 8, 2015

## TIFF's corporate mentality

When: Wednesday afternoon, September 16

Where: Outside the Bloor Hotdocs Cinema, Bloor Street near Bathurst, Toronto

What: Screening of *This Changes Everything*, directed by Avi Lewis and narrated by Naomi Klein. The film is being shown as part of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). Lewis and Klein will be on hand after the screening to answer questions from the audience about the film's anti-corporate message and the need for fundamental system change. Some of the most dramatic moments in the film concern oil spills, and the devastation caused by the tar sands.

The Scene: people lined up along Bloor Street, waiting for the doors to open.

Action: Two friends, who will be attending the film, start handing out flyers about Line 9, the aging leak-prone pipeline which Enbridge wants to reverse so they can ship corrosive tar sands crud eastward, crossing communities, farmland, and dozens of rivers.

They've barely started when one of the TIFF staff appears and tells them they can't hand out flyers. "Why not?" they reply, pointing out that the sidewalk is public space.

The TIFF functionary replies that the people in the line have bought tickets to the film, and therefore you aren't allowed to hand out anything to them. The logic is unclear: They've bought tickets, so TIFF owns them? They've bought tickets, so they've given up their democratic right to accept a flyer if they want to? They've bought tickets, so TIFF now owns the sidewalk they happen to be standing on? It's hard to figure out.

My guess would be that TIFF sees everything in terms of what their website touts as "Promotional Rights." They promise prospective corporate sponsors that "With the support of the TIFF brand, execute consumer or trade promotions in the marketplace that create brand excitement and drive your marketing objectives." In other words, free speech belongs exclusively to corporations with lots of money to achieve their "marketing objectives."

In any case, my friends quickly set up a division of labour. One of them argues with the TIFF bureaucrat; meanwhile the other hands out the flyers. Naturally, hearing that they aren't supposed to be given these flyers, the people in the line are all the more interested in taking one.

When the doors open, my friends go in – they've bought tickets too, of course. After the film, in the question period, one of them mentions to Lewis and Klein that they were handing out flyers outside about Line 9. Wonderful, Lewis and Klein reply. My friend says that TIFF staff tried to stop them, but that they'll be handing out more of them outside afterwards. They do, and even more people are eager to receive the forbidden flyers.

The moral?

1) Telling people they aren't allowed to hand out or accept literature in public space is a great way to get people to take the flyers. Being banned by TIFF is an excellent way for activists to "create brand excitement and drive your marketing objectives." Thanks for that, TIFF!

2) TIFF, though technically a non-profit, has become a corporate behemoth, saturated from top to bottom with corporate priorities. They've become a marketing machine for the film industry, beholden to its sponsors, its judgments skewed by the mentality they've adopted. Who can remember the original Festival of Festivals, with its emphasis on showing good films, rather than on marketing, back in the good old days when Hollywood refused to have anything to do with a film festival in Toronto?

## **The end of carding?**

The Ontario government has announced that it intends to bring in regulations to stop the police practice of stopping people at random and demanding their information. Of course this form of harassment, known as “carding” in Ontario, is far from random: everyone knows who is likely to be stopped, and what the colour of their skin is likely to be. Putting an end to it sounds good, but as always the devil is in the details, and the wording shows that nothing much is likely to change. Here’s a letter that I sent to the Toronto Star, which they published on October 31:

The end of carding? Not a chance. The new legislation will allow police to stop, question and document members of the public if they have a “valid policing purpose,” defined as “detecting or preventing illegal activities.” That’s a loophole big enough to allow any cop anywhere to stop and question anyone they want, as long as they claim that doing so might result in detecting or preventing some unspecified illegal activity. And, as always, most of those stopped and harassed will just happen to be black, or aboriginal, or poor. As the saying goes, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

October 31, 2015

### **“A warm reminder of humanity’s less barbaric traits”**

An article published in the Washington Post, and picked up by corporate media outlets around the world, is headlined “Famous Ukrainian opera singer Vasyl Slipak killed by sniper in eastern Ukraine.”

“Amid the thud of artillery and rattle of gunfire,” the story begins, “Vasyl Slipak’s deep, resonant voice in the trenches of eastern Ukraine was a warm reminder of humanity’s less barbaric traits.”

And just what was Slipak doing in the trenches of eastern Ukraine? Ah, well, he was serving in a neo-Nazi militia which was besieging a predominantly Russian-speaking town in eastern Ukraine. The group, Right Sector (Pravyi Sektor) was formed in late November 2013 as a paramilitary organization – or, to put it more bluntly, an armed gang – comprised of streetfighting soccer fans and right-wing nationalist groups.

When he was shot, Slipak was firing a machine gun at fighters defending the town that Right Sector was attacking.

In the eyes of the corporate media, it seems, a fascist engaged in ethnic cleansing represents “humanity’s less barbaric traits,” as long as the victims are Russian-speaking.

July 1, 2016

## Sports and politics

Sports in general, and the Olympics in particular, have never been free of politics. Allegations of bribery and cheating had already been part of the Olympics for centuries before that noteworthy day in 67 AD when the judges proclaimed the Emperor Nero winner of the Olympic chariot race even though he had been thrown from his chariot and failed to complete the race.

No doubt the judges who crowned Nero were keenly aware of his proclivity for executing those who displeased him. In the modern sports era, survival and success depend largely on the favour of corporations, whose power to provide or withhold funding and sponsorships now shape every aspect of sport, including athletes' incomes and lifestyles. It is now difficult to remember that only a few decades ago, corporate logos were strictly forbidden at Olympic events, while athletes were prohibited from accepting any kind of payment for their involvement in sports. The corporate conquest of sports closely parallels the corporate colonization of nearly all aspects of modern life. Accompanying this in recent years has been the increasing injection of militaristic content into sports spectacles. In Canada, hockey games are now commonly preceded by rituals honouring militarism. In the United States, similar spectacles have been staged for years....

August 13, 2016: Introduction to the August 13, 2016 issue of Other Voices

## Liberal Condescension

In the wake of Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. election, a debate has erupted on the liberal left about the best way to deal with working class people who voted for Trump. The disagreement, for many of the participants, appears to revolve around whether liberals ought to spend their time giving patronizing lectures about white privilege, or patronizing lectures about other aspects of reality.

What people on both sides of the debate seem to share is the assumption that the job of middle-class liberals is to lecture the working class.

The language being used in the heated atmosphere of Facebook and other social media circles about the relationship of middle-class liberals to working people is striking: "tell them how privileged they are," "white working people can be woken up," "reminding poor white folks," "upper middle-class/urban whites need to find a way to turn working class rural whites against racism," "The duty of educating the white working class," "reminding poor white folks that they too are the frequent victims," etc.

The main result of the condescending, know-it-all attitude that the liberal left specializes in is to make ordinary working people of all colours and genders think that leftists are idiots to be avoided at all costs. Of course, that only applies to the tiny minority of working people who have even heard of the left. The propensity of the liberal left to spend its time talking exclusively to people who share their views ensures that most working people don't even hear the patronizing lectures that are supposed to "wake them up."

Revolutionary change can only come through organizing on a society-wide level. And organizing always begins with listening, not lecturing. It's not a job for people who already think they know everything and just have to explain it to the poor unenlightened masses.

November 15, 2015

## Farewell to the Guardian

*Today I sent the following letter to the Guardian Weekly cancelling my subscription:*

After several decades of buying the Guardian Weekly, I have decided not to renew my subscription.

The Guardian always had its faults, but one tolerated them because it also offered high-quality journalism. This is no longer the case. What was once a serious newspaper with high standards has degenerated into little more than a propaganda sheet. One can still occasionally find quality reporting in its pages, but not when it comes to the crucial issues of our time.

On those crucial issues – such as Russia, Ukraine, Greece, US/NATO provocations and interventions in other countries, the Guardian’s bias is extreme, without even a pretense of balance or objectivity. Its campaign of vilification against Jeremy Corbyn has been nothing short of disgusting.

Why would I pay for a subscription to the Guardian when I could – if I wanted to – get the same level of ‘journalism’ for free on Fox News or the Mirror website? Why would I pay money to help pay for the salaries of people like Jonathan Freeland?

I made my final decision not to renew my subscription when the Weekly published a fawning piece about Tony Blair in the February 24 issue, followed three days later by the Guardian editorial praising George W. Bush’s return as an elder statesman. At the same time, the Guardian’s subscription solicitation urged that “You’ll help us hold the powerful to account.” When a newspaper has arrived at the point of praising war criminals while deluding itself that it is holding the powerful to account, I know that it’s not a newspaper that I want to keep receiving.

March 7, 2017

## Only 100 cyclists...

A news article reports that a woman riding her bicycle was seriously injured by a hit-and-run driver in Halton, a regional municipality west of Toronto.

But, hey, no big deal. According to Sgt. Ryan Snow, a spokesperson for the police force, “Incidents like this are relatively rare in the Halton region. We only get about 100 collisions (per year) in our region involving cyclists.”

“Relatively rare.” “Only” 100. Another stark reminder of what cyclists’ and pedestrians’ lives are worth in the eyes of the cops.

Suppose a police officer had been injured, rather than a cyclist. What would the Sergeant have said then? It’s probably a safe bet that it wouldn’t have been “We only get about 100 incidents a year in which police officers are injured.”

July 25, 2017



## **Smoke seen coming out of chimney!!**

The suspicious activities of those Russians never cease, it seems, and neither does the vigilance of the mainstream media in exposing them. A breathless expose by two reporters from the Associated Press alerts us to the fact that smoke was seen coming out of the chimney of the Russian consulate in San Francisco yesterday. A spokesperson for the San Francisco Fire Department contacted by Associated Press confirmed the report: “They had a fire going in their fireplace,” she said. “They were burning something in their fireplace.”

September 2, 2017

## **Protecting individual privacy – with a large dose of hypocrisy**

In a prominent half-page article in Canada’s highest-circulation newspaper, the Toronto Star, columnist Emma Teitel criticizes “the media” for invading the privacy of the daughter of a prominent politician. The young woman, Teitel admonishes us, “is entitled to some privacy.”

Teitel’s article is accompanied by a large photo of the young woman in question. In her article, Teitel provides detailed examples of personal information “the media” should not be reporting: she tells us who the young woman has dated, where she has been seen, and who she has been seen kissing.

Apparently when other media report this information, they are violating the young woman’s privacy. But when Teitel discloses exactly the same information, accompanied by a huge photo, in the largest-circulation newspaper in the country (and on the paper’s website) she is “defending” the young woman’s privacy.

November 24, 2017

## **Guidelines for police in dealing with mentally ill people**

An investigative report by the CBC shows that more than 460 people in Canada have “died in encounters with police” since the year 2000. Why do they say “died in encounters with police” rather than “killed by police”? Well, because some people have a perverse tendency to die from heart attacks or other sudden medical emergencies while being tasered or beaten up. That’s not our fault, the cops always say.

In any case, the CBC’s report shows that 70% of those who died suffered either from mental illness or substance abuse problems, or both. A disproportionate number are black.

Predictably, this report concludes, as all such reports do, that the police need more “training” to deal with mentally ill people. Police spokespeople agree that more training would be a good thing, but they complain that it’s so hard to get that training, and to get it right. “We’re not getting information about what kind of words or actions might trigger more aggressive behaviour, or what kind of words or actions might have a calming effect on a person in a crisis,” complains the president of the Canadian Police Association.

Strangely, though, other people who regularly encounter persons in crisis, for example emergency room nurses, or staff at drop-in centres, or even bouncers in bars, seem able to

calm things down without shooting anyone or tasing anyone. What secret knowledge do they have that eludes the cops?

I don't claim to have the skills to provide training in this area, but let me offer these initial guidelines for our puzzled cops:

- 1) Don't shoot.
- 2) Back off.
- 3) Don't shoot.
- 4) Speak calmly and ask if you can help.
- 5) Don't shoot.

### **Misleading figures on greenhouse gas emissions**

A letter to the editor from an oil industry apologist (April 12) tries to excuse the Alberta oilsands' growing carbon emissions with the argument that Canada accounts for "just" 1.6 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Even if that figure were accurate, it would mean that Canada is producing emissions which are more than three times as large as its proportion of the world's population. In order not to exceed its share, Canada would need to reduce its emissions by at least two-thirds.

But in fact the figure of 1.6 per cent omits a huge portion of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. It is based on the pretense that if the oil the industry extracts from the ground isn't burned until after it is shipped across the border, then we aren't responsible. This is nonsense. It's like saying that if you throw your garbage across the fence into your neighbour's backyard, it's her problem and you bear no responsibility for it.

The make-believe number of 1.6 per cent also ignores the fact that a substantial proportion of Canada's emissions are actually produced in countries like China in the course of manufacturing goods that we consume. If factories in Asia are burning fossil fuels in order to produce goods for us, then those are also our emissions. We also need to add the enormous consumption of fossil fuels produced by shipping products across the ocean. The shipping industry, together with air transport and air travel, are huge contributors to carbon emissions and therefore to global climate change, yet we pretend we don't need to count them.

Canada's energy-wasting economy, and Canada's petroleum industry in particular, are urgent problems for the entire planet. We need to accept this fact and act on it, without deluding ourselves with misleading statistics.

April 12, 2018



## Fallacies about free public transit

*Whenever the movement for free public transit shows signs of gaining public support, the media digs up 'experts' who furrow their brows and tell us what an impractical idea it is. An article in the November 25 Toronto Star is a case in point. Here is a letter I wrote in response:*

Opponents of free public transit resort to two fallacious arguments.

The first is that good transit is more important than free transit in persuading commuters to take transit. This is not an either-or choice. It is quite possible – and necessary, if we are to avert climate catastrophe – to have transit that is good, accessible, safe, and free.

The second fallacy is the claim that providing free transit will be expensive. This is false. The operating costs of a transit system are the same whether the costs are paid out of fares, or out of taxes, or some combination. Providing free transit would in fact eliminate the substantial costs of collecting and enforcing payment, including the horrendous costs of the ongoing Presto debacle.

Free transit simply means that transit is paid for out of general tax revenues, rather than fares. Free transit benefits everyone, including those who don't use it. It is an idea whose time has come.

November 25, 2019

## Eratosthenes: Measuring the Earth on the Solstice

The Solstice falls at 5:44 EDT on June 20 this year.

It's a special day, and for nerds like me, it's also historic because it was on the Solstice in 240 BCE (give or take a couple of years, the record is a bit unclear) that Eratosthenes, a Greek geographer, mathematician, astronomer, poet, and librarian, first calculated the circumference of the earth.

Eratosthenes lived in Alexandria, where he served as the librarian of the great library of Alexandria. He learned from travelling merchants that in the town of Syene, far to the south of Alexandria, on midday on the day of the solstice, the sun shone directly down a deep well, reflecting off the water below, something that happened on no other day of the year.

Eratosthenes knew that the sun would have to be directly overhead for this to happen, and he also knew that this never happened in Alexandria. Using the shadow of a vertical stick, he measured the sun's angle in Alexandria on day of the Solstice, and found that it was about 7.2 degrees away from being vertical, about one-fiftieth of a circle (360 degrees). He reasoned that if he could measure the distance from Alexandria to Syene, he would then be able to calculate the earth's circumference.

Traders told him that it took 50 days for their camels to travel from Alexandria to Syene. Eratosthenes knew that travellers riding camels could cover about one hundred stadia (about 11-and-a-half miles) in one day, so he calculated that the distance from Alexandria to Syene was about 5,000 stadia, or about 570 miles. He multiplied this figure by 50, and arrived at an estimate of about 28,500 miles for the earth's circumference. That's about 15% off the current measurement of about 24,900 miles; not bad for 240 BCE.

June 20, 2020

## **“Silencing” the unsilent**

A March 7 opinion article says it’s “Time to stop silencing women in politics.” The author takes offense to Ontario Premier Doug Ford being bluntly critical of the Leader of the Opposition, the NDP’s Andrea Horwath.

As anyone who follows politics must know, politicians are constantly attacking and putting down opposing politicians. Andrea Horwath, for one, does it on a daily basis.

But if a female politician is criticized by a male politician, then, according to this columnist, the male politician is “silencing” the woman politician. This would appear to be an instance of the broader cultural moment which holds that if anyone disagrees with you, let alone criticizes you, then this creates an “unsafe” environment and “silences” you. Even though, one can’t help observing, those who proclaim that they have been “silenced” are rarely silent: commonly they are articulate middle-class people who are well able to make themselves heard and make themselves the centre of attention.

Certainly Andrea Horwath, a tough and experienced politician, has not been silenced, not in the least. She is up on her feet pretty much every day, usually in front of a microphone, frequently saying harshly critical things about Premier Ford, who, for his part, is also anything but silent. Politics as usual, in other words.

April 1, 2021

## **Wishful thinking as a climate plan**

Canada’s federal government has announced new targets for cutting greenhouse gas emissions. The new target is to reduce emissions by 40% to 45% below 2005 levels by 2030. That’s an increase from the previous target of 30% set by the Harper government. Even so, the targets are inadequate, and all the more so since they don’t count emissions from shipping, air travel, and the military.

What the new plan also doesn’t include is any plausible strategy for achieving these targets. We’ll continue the present approach of trusting that ‘market mechanisms’ coupled with subsidies for ‘innovative technology’ (and pipelines) will somehow get us there.

That’s the approach that has resulted in a 1 per cent drop in emissions since 2005. One per cent in 15 years. If we continue at the current rate, it will take us roughly 675 years to achieve those targets. The new climate plan isn’t a plan: it’s a fantasy.

May 1, 2021

## **Greening the energy sector**

An article in the business section describes what it calls the “greening of the energy sector.” One strategy for doing this, it seems, is that some companies are selling oil assets to other companies which don’t care so much about pretending to be green. So the company that sells off oil assets can position itself as ‘green’ by showing that it has reduced its activities in the oil and gas sector. Of course, the oil and gas is still being extracted and burned, by someone else.

Some people may be fooled by this, but the planet is not fooled.

May 1, 2021

## Red tape bad, more red tape better

Ontario's Progressive Conservative government, which bestowed the slogan "Open for Business" on the province after it took office, has been living up to its name by "cutting red tape" in order to make life easier for businesses. Ministerial Zoning Orders, which allow developers to build what they want, where they want, without being bothered by tiresome requirements like environmental assessments or public meetings, are a good example of what the Ford government means by cutting red tape.

Back in the days when Ontario was last blessed with a Progressive Conservative government, the one headed by the odious Mike Harris, I wrote a couple of articles about what cutting red tape means on the ground. One of the articles focused on the Walkerton water disaster (Contamination), the other (Abandoning the Public Interest) looked at a number of countries to see what happens when governments cut environmental and health regulations to make life easier for corporations. (Spoiler alert: people die.)

On the other hand, the project I work with, Connexions ([www.connexions.org](http://www.connexions.org)) is incorporated as a non-profit, so in our extremely modest way we are also potential beneficiaries of the government's initiatives to cut red tape. We learned more about how one of them affects us just this past week.

The Connexions Archive moved into a new space on the University of Toronto campus a little while ago. Naturally this requires making some address changes. I asked one of our volunteers, N, to update our address of record with Service Ontario. Doing so promised to be very simple: our package of corporate documents actually contains a change-of-address form. All you have to do is fill it out and send it in. N checked the Service Ontario website just to be sure that is still how it is done. No: it turns out that the procedure has changed. Red tape, so an upbeat Government of Ontario news release informs us, is being eliminated even here.

What, you may ask, could be simpler than filling out a change-of-address form and sending it in? Ah, now you can – indeed, you must – file a request to change your address via Service Ontario's website.

And then? Then they send you an authorization code which you have to submit before your change is accepted. The authorization code gets sent to you in an envelope which in due course Canada Post will deliver – to your old address.

"But," said N, when she managed to eventually speak to a human, "we aren't at our old address any more. That is why we are submitting a change of address." "We have to send the authorization to your address of record," was the implacable reply.

Fortunately, our old address is nearby, not in another city, the building is still standing, and we left on good terms, so I am making arrangements to head over and pick up the authorization code when it gets delivered. I'll use to opportunity to drop by The Roastery, which I miss now that we're no longer at 401 Richmond. I'll probably have a coffee, and reflect on how much less red tape there is under a Tory government.

October 24, 2021

## Things are getting better and better and bettxrxr and bxzyxxx

For the past few days, every time I log in to Facebook, it pops up a message that I am logging in from an unknown device and have to go through a security check (they send me a code via email which I have to submit to be let in). As it happens, these days I always use the same computer, sitting on top of the same desk, with the same mac address, same network card, same IP address, and same browser.

On the other hand, when I was travelling in the Atlantic provinces in the summer, and infrequently logging in, with a different computer, using the WiFi network at whatever campground or B&B I happened to be in, Facebook was happy to let me in without a security check.

Such are the glories of Artificial Intelligence. This is the corporation governments are now pressuring to use the prowess of their Artificial Intelligence to censor what users are allowed to say.

Certainly Facebook isn't alone in its ability to screw up seemingly simple things. I have been updating a number of business and personal accounts recently, for example by updating contact information, or switching some payments from one credit card to another. Simple changes, which usually involve going online or calling a 1-800 number.

From these experiences, I have learned a few things about the companies I have been calling:

- 1) They are experiencing a higher volume of calls than usual.
- 2) They have been experiencing a higher-than-usual volume of calls for years.
- 3) They won't be hiring any more staff to handle the usual, higher-than-usual, volume of calls.
- 4) They have changed their options to serve me better.
- 5) The new improved options don't allow me to do what I need to do any better than the old unimproved options did. They may in fact be worse.
- 6) In addition to a website and an 800-number, some of them also have an app (an "award-winning app" in the case of one company I called today: the recording mentioned the "award-winning app" three times before it allowed me to choose an option, whereupon I was cut off).
- 7) The award-winning app doesn't allow me to do what I need to do either. (It also doesn't tell me who bestowed the award on their app, or what the criteria were. I certainly know that the customers weren't invited to vote on the award.)
- 8) Sometimes you will be offered an online chat option. To use it, you will first have to choose from a list of topics.
- 9) None of the choices will apply to your problem.
- 10) The overworked and underpaid people who answer the phones, if you manage to get through to one (they are often your only hope when the websites and award-winning apps don't let you do what you need to do) are well aware of how glitchy the systems are. On two occasions this week, the person I was dealing with hurriedly gave me a phone number (different from the main 1-800 number) to call back on "just in case you get cut off during the call."
- 11) It's not going to get better. Ever.
- 12) We need to overthrow capitalism.

## World Hippopotamus Day

February 15 is World Hippopotamus Day. It is a day to honour the hippopotamus and support action to preserve hippos, which means preserving their habitat, protecting them from poaching, and minimizing conflicts between humans and hippos.

Once thought to be related to pigs and other even-toed ungulates, we now know that the hippo's closest living relatives are actually whales, from which they diverged about 55 million years ago.

Appealing as they look in their own pudgy way, it is best to stay well clear of them. In Africa, about 500 people are killed by hippopotamuses every year, which makes them significantly more dangerous than lions and other large carnivores. They are short-tempered and aggressive, especially when protecting their young. If a boat enters their territory, they may overturn it and kill the occupants. On land, they can easily outrun the fastest human. Admire them from a distance.

But left alone, they are amazing creatures. We should all be grateful for that day 55 million years ago when evolution gave a whale a tiny nudge in a different direction, starting a development which eventually led to the wonderful hippopotamus.

February 15, 2022

## Deep thinking about what the census shows

The Toronto Star has published an in-depth analysis of the latest census data for Toronto, looking specifically at which areas of the city have grown in population in the last five years, and which areas have remained more or less the same. The startling conclusion – you may want to sit down before reading further – is that those areas of the city which have seen a lot of highrise construction have grown in population. The population of those areas which haven't seen new highrises go up has tended to remain stable, or in some cases even declined a little. Who would have thought? Thank goodness we have journalists to figure these things out.

Of course, no feature article in the Star is complete without some finger-pointing and blaming. Karen Chapple, director of the University of Toronto's school of cities, is glad to oblige. "What's happening there [in the stable-population areas] is exclusion," says Chapple. When existing residents 'hold tight to their homes', she said, prospective new residents are effectively shut out. In other words, people who live in the same house or apartment year after year, rather than making room by being considerate enough to die or at least move into a nursing home, are guilty of causing social harm.

One has to ask: isn't that true of everyone who isn't actually homeless and living on the street? Doesn't Professor Chapple live in an apartment or a house? Isn't she just as guilty of 'excluding' someone else from moving in by selfishly continuing to 'hold tight' to her home? In fact, since she is on the faculty of the University of California, Berkeley, as well as the University of Toronto, is she in fact 'holding tight' to two homes, one in Toronto and one in Berkeley? And by continuing to work rather than retiring, isn't she also 'excluding' one or more young Phds from getting a faculty position?

February 24, 2022

## Netanyahu's legacy

An Associated Press (AP) story, carried by many corporate media outlets, reports that former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is seeking to negotiate a plea deal in his bribery trial. The goal is to avoid an “embarrassing and protracted trial,” says AP, that “risks tarnishing his legacy.”

Isn't that rather like worrying that a shoplifting conviction could “tarnish” Jack the Ripper's legacy?

February 24, 2022

## Through the lens of clichés

Every topic that attracts any attention is now being looked at “through a lens” of one kind or another. Like every cliché that becomes popular, looking at things “through a lens” is now dropped into “conversations” about pretty well anything.

An article in the Toronto Star about the problem of snow that blocks driveways after snowplows have gone by proclaims that it will approach this and other problems by “taking ideas from other places and running them through the lens of Toronto.” It's not clear how you ‘run things through a lens’, but if it is possible, one wishes the Star would occasionally run its articles through the lens of a copy editor.

February 24, 2022

## Curated Ears

Once upon a time, a curator was someone who managed a collection in a museum or similar institution. Curating was what they did. Now everything that involves selecting or displaying anything, anything at all, is known as curating. The latest is “curated ears.” When I first saw the headline, I thought someone had set up an ear museum along the same lines as the penis museum in Iceland. But no: curated ears are when you wear earrings that you chose carefully and really like. I get it: I have a carefully curated drawer full of socks. It's a very selective: only socks that don't have holes are included.

February 24, 2022

## International Day of Action for Rivers

March 14 is the 25th International Day of Action for Rivers.

The announcement says: “The International Day of Action for Rivers is a day dedicated to solidarity – when diverse communities around the world come together with one voice to say that rivers matter. That communities having access to clean and flowing water matters. That everyone should have a say in decisions that affect their water and their lives. That it’s our time to stand up for these rights, now more than ever. Rivers are key to restoring and maintaining the world’s biodiversity. River systems are the zone of Earth’s highest biological diversity.”

This is a cause I can whole-heartedly support. Rivers have always been special to me, starting perhaps when the ship that brought my mother and me to Canada sailed up the St. Lawrence River. The lower St. Lawrence is no longer the ocean, but it is not quite river yet, or perhaps it is both: it is in transition, as my life was in transition as we slowly headed up the river.

Growing up in Toronto, the Don River and all the little creeks that flow into it were special places that I loved to explore. I still return to them regularly. Later I branched out to the Humber and the Rouge. For many years, the Saugeen was the river closest to my heart: I canoed, kayaked, swam, and simply sat by the shore watching it. I watched it flow by in quiet tranquility – and I watched it rise more than ten feet in a few hours and triple its width as it flooded the land.

There are others: the Grand River flowing through Paris, Ontario, the little Kagawong River on Manitoulin Island, the majestic Saint John River (Wolastoq to the Maliseet) in New Brunswick, and the Exploits and Humber Rivers in Newfoundland – all of them are rivers I have come to have a special relationship with. The living waters of a river are among the most precious glories this planet has to offer. I am always drawn to rivers. I treasure them.

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