

Essay Archive 1: Early Editorials (1990-1999)

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“Every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind, is written large in his works.”

— Virginia Woolf

Not long after the 1993 federal election in Canada, having secured enough seats to form the opposition in Ottawa, the provincial wing of the Parti Quebecois under leader Jacques Parizeau rejuvenated their separatist campaign, and soon they were planning a second referendum. Maclean’s insouciant columnist, Alan Fotheringham, wittily referred to it as the Quebec Neverendum.

Meanwhile, I was having serious reservations about what was going on. I found the results of the election disquieting, and all the talk of another referendum was getting my back up. I felt an editorial was necessary...

The Great Canadian Distraction

The ongoing Quebec separatist movement has been the biggest, most successful political bluff in Canadian history. What began long ago as a genuine reaction to favoritism towards English speaking Quebecers has evolved over the years to become another matter altogether. It has garnered that province special treatment and programs for decades, and it is not entirely Quebec’s fault. Canada’s own lack of self-appreciation for what it is and where it came from lies at the heart of the matter as well.

Founded on the joining of “two solitudes” (French and English), Canada has been talked out of remembering and celebrating the circumstances of its birth. Now the rest of Canada, and I believe many Quebecois, continue to be held hostage by an empty but effective threat. Given our underdeveloped

sense of national identity we shouldn't be surprised. Political motivations on both sides of the question, and a heavy dose of Quebec born prime ministers, have perpetuated the situation. Politicians of every stripe at both levels of government benefit from it by diverting public attention from real issues they don't have the political will to properly address (i.e.. education, poverty, etc.). As a result, we are all burdened with what I have come to call the Great Canadian Distraction.

Is it just me, or does it seem strange to anyone else that a political party with the expressed intention of breaking up the country was permitted to come into existence on the federal level? We can say nothing about it on the provincial level, but how could we allow a subversive provincial movement to gain an official place in the federation? Even if this is granted, shouldn't such a party be compelled to run at least one candidate in each province and territory, and forced thereby to get to know the country they wish to destroy? And shouldn't we have been spared the embarrassment of such a party gaining the title of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition in the recent federal election?

The latest development saw the federal government lending further credence to the separatists by taking their demands to court. The decision in favour of the federalists could have hardly been otherwise, but now we are faced with yet another referendum, which by all rights should be Canada-wide - it is a federal matter. The federalists should assure themselves of victory leading up to the referendum by letting the people of Quebec know that negotiations after the referendum will only result in something the perpetrators of the Great Canadian Distraction already know - it won't work, it never could, and they wouldn't want it anyway.

Problem: the child is already spoiled rotten.

One last question: Does the word treason mean anything in Canada, or does it go by another name when it is plied by a political party and encouraged by federal complacency and incompetence?

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Sometimes a certain issue will come up and strike me in the face, and I am reminded that it has been striking me for many years. It nags at me until I've had enough, and I simply must tackle it in some way. Such is the case with this editorial.

One day in 1996, having heard a news story about cutbacks in the health care sector, followed by another story about mounting student loan debt, I knew it was finally time to put down a few words and address both issues together...

Priorities

Few things are more fundamental and crucial for the contemporary human being than health and education. The very possibility of a meaningful future, for an individual and society, is predicated on this. Moreover, they are mutually dependent, as physical and mental illnesses impair the ability to learn, while the benefits of education for a prosperous life are obvious. So, considering the importance of public education programs in preventing illness, and how vital cutting-edge medical practices and research are to us all, why doesn't our government's policies reflect this?

Often, and especially during times of fiscal restraint, health and education budgets are subjected to the same austerity measures as transportation or tourism. While more hospital beds close and the waiting list for life-saving operations grows, more golf courses are built. As students borrow more and more to pay for ever-increasing tuition fees and over-priced textbooks, banks use our money to make record profits for themselves. Where are our priorities?

The greatest investment a government can make in a nation is to ensure that each citizen, regardless of her/his geographic or financial circumstances, has access to excellent health care services and a solid education. The benefits are incalculable, while the consequences are all too real. Healthy, educated people are happy and successful; they buy more, contribute more to the tax coffers, frequently end up as entrepreneurs who employ others, and are generally easier to get along with.

But the unhealthy and/or uneducated citizen fights a losing battle against poverty and unemployment, and relationships can be strained or even dysfunctional due to the stress of her/his socio-economic situation. Adding insult to injury, society tends to alienate the less fortunate and then look down on them. I know this to be true from years of painful personal experience. Why are we surprised when some of these unfortunates turn to crime, when the real crime is our failure to give the highest priority to affordable, accessible, universal health care and education?

We would be better served by a government that puts health and education first. All else flows from this. After legitimate waste and duplication of services have been addressed, money should not be an issue in these areas. All other ministries must take a back seat and be subject to budget cuts, but not health and education - these are, or at least should be, our birthrights.

Bringing this about, however, involves a major shift in public consciousness. We must learn to reject a government that views health care as something to be meted out; and we must stop equating education with school.

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During the campaign of the 1997 federal election, thoughts I had had on the Canadian election system were coalescing. Ideas for improvement of the system had been building up for years, so I finally wrote it up in essay form and sent it out as another editorial...

Make Elections More Democratic? Not Likely.

Isn't it about time we revamped the Election Act? There are several changes that would save money and, more importantly, enhance the very nature of democracy in Canada and make it more effective. Consider the following radical adjustments.

First, if we can bank by phone and/or online, why can't we vote by phone and/or online? Think of the savings alone. A mid-sized forest is sacrificed every election cycle, so many halls and gyms have to be booked and paid for, and it's labour intensive. There is simply no need. Second, voting by phone and/or online would allow us to make voting mandatory; and maybe those who refuse to vote without good reason should be unable to benefit from government programs for the term of that government. Imagine a turnout of more than 95% of eligible voters. Third, with universal voting we would be able to include on every ballot a "non-vote" option, so voters could register their disapproval if none of the choices offered appeals to them, and to have those counted as well in the vote totals. This would be to acknowledge the limited choices our present form of democracy permits us, with just a few viable parties and platforms from which to choose, and it would give voters a

way to object to this insulting aspect of democracy.

Now, before you write these suggestions off as the rantings of an unrealistic idealist, take some time to consider their merits. The poor and disenfranchised have given up on having their government reflect their concerns. Unfortunately, this means the financially fortunate are left to make up the lion's share of voters, and it is they who have the most to gain from governments that pander to the business and blueblood sector. The less fortunate become disillusioned with the system, while the fortunate are left to perpetuate and gain from it. The less fortunate, along with the labour movement, have a say once every four or five years, while the minions of the well-healed lobby government for them throughout the term. Under these circumstances it is fair to ask: Who's government is it anyway?

These humble suggestions may be the only way to get all the people to participate in their democracy. Mandatory, universal voting would give everyone a clear picture of exactly what the province or nation thinks. Add the "non-vote" option and we have a genuine opportunity to officially object to the election platforms offered, and these "votes" would become part of the vote count and the election narrative. If an election's results showed that upwards of forty percent of voters cast a "non-vote", and so declined to vote as a protest, I submit such results would see an immediate effort by all parties to court and try to win over this segment of the electorate, giving us political parties and governments that make an honest effort to campaign and govern. Moreover, voters would have a far more effective and dynamic voice with this kind of power, and they would be far more likely to retain their memories of what happened during the term of a government, instead of losing them and failing to hold politicians accountable. Active participation in anything makes it more memorable.

Of course, this will never happen. Not because they are bad ideas, but because they are too good, too effective. The rich wouldn't like them, nor would the politicians. It would make snap referenda on anything serious possible; everyone would be able to vote or non-vote; and the people would have a say throughout the term instead of just once between terms. It would make the politicians share the power they now hoard for themselves, the potential for corruption goes way down, and we make our democracy more, well, more democratic - more "of the people".

No, they would never go along with it. We need to think about what this means, especially when we know there is a better way.

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In 1998, the romantic and sexual encounters between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky came to scandalous light, and Clinton faced possible impeachment. However, after all the dust settled, Clinton emerged relatively unscathed and suffered little or no loss in public support. This, and the quote referenced at the end of the piece, made me feel compelled to weigh in with an editorial...

American Morality?

So, President Clinton did indeed conduct himself in a lecherous manner with Ms. Lewinsky, and a great deal of presidential time, attention, and effort was devoted to sustaining and hiding it. To my mind, the only thing more disgusting than the president's behaviour and attitude is the inability of the people of the United States to muster any degree of moral outrage about it. What kind of nation is this?

Many Americans interviewed about it say his private life is nobody's business, that he is still a good president, and we don't need to hear the seamy details. Well, to begin with, the president made his private life public by carrying on his affair in the public domain (i.e. in and around the Oval Office). And how can Americans regard their president as good when children throughout the country, including his own daughter, know their leader and role-model-in-chief behaved this way; that he lied and encouraged others to lie; and that, incredibly, he got away with it? As regards not wanting to hear the sordid details, who are they trying to kid besides themselves? Saying Americans don't want to hear the graphic details of the president's affair is like saying a narcissist doesn't want attention - I simply don't believe it.

Mr. Clinton's severe lack of judgement, his belief that he is above the law, and ultimately his refusal to tell the truth made hearing the details necessary to prove he lied and suborned perjury. He alone is responsible for what happened, and for the cost of the protracted legal process to get to the bottom

of it (for all the good that did), to say nothing of the huge distraction from his duties as president. He is responsible and suspect due to multiple self-inflicted wounds: shady real estate deals (Whitewater), improper campaign fundraising, several charges of sexual harassment, and two extra-marital affairs, as far as we know.

One wonders how many Americans who say Clinton's private life is none of our business are really saying so because they want to leave open the possibility of getting away with the same kinds of things themselves. Relative morality, situational ethics - this is the American way. And when it comes right down to it, the legal always supersedes the moral in the United States. This, and all its disturbing implications, were all too clear when White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry said: "The president's conduct, while reprehensible, did not rise to the level of an impeachable offense." The inherent contradiction is undeniable and sadly instructive.

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In late 1999 and early 2000 we were staring into the maw of a failing fishery, and the debate over seals and cod stocks was raging in Newfoundland and Labrador, lighting up our radio open line switchboards like Christmas trees. Having been a fisheries officer in Trinity Bay for a couple of years back in the late eighties, and filled with fishermen's stories and opinions, including those I heard as a boy at the feet of my uncles in Grates Cove, I knew both sides of the argument well. Finally, with so much talk about seals eating cod since they stopped the seal hunt, I needed to put in my two-cents worth...

Cod Stocks, Seals, and Culpability

The recent debate regarding how much of our once abundant cod stocks have been depleted, and how they are endangered by the growing seal population, threatens to be, if you'll pardon the expression, a red herring. It diverts our attention from what has always been the real culprit - dragger technology. Fisherpersons have always known this, and they know seals eat cod. Let's take each issue separately.

We must be careful not to exclude ourselves from the balance of nature. Animal rights groups need to be reminded that, like it or not, we are a part of that complex balance. The sealing industry was and is part of it too, and its diminution has caused an increase in seal stocks. We have taken our finger out of the dike, as it were. Now there are more seals to eat an already decimated cod stock. Is anyone surprised by this?

The truth is the damage has already been done. The cod stocks have been pillaged for decades by political decisions that allow countless domestic and foreign draggers to rape the resource, using fishing technology endorsed by our own governments. And it's not hard to understand how draggers devastate cod stocks. The cod is termed a groundfish because it feeds off the grounds (i.e.. the ocean floor). The leading edge of a dragger's massive, heavy net sinks a few meters into the ocean floor, then it is dragged along taking not only groundfish, but also the reason they are there in the first place - the feeding grounds. Imagine a cattle farmer buying pastureland, putting his herd on it, then taking up the sods and selling them. Dragging for groundfish amounts to the same kind of nonsensical resource management.

Fisherfolk had been warning Ottawa all along that draggers would sound the death knell of the ground fishery. They were right and they were ignored. Cod stocks have either died off due to the destruction of their feeding grounds, or they have simply relocated to more stable and nutritious places, or a combination of both. Seals aren't the biggest cause of depleted cod stocks; they're just eating what is left.

We must return to our original level of seal hunting as one of multiple strategies to rectify the situation and bring nature back to a more balanced state, if we are to ever have an opportunity to see cod stocks replenish again. Not because seals are responsible, but because we have been and continue to be irresponsible stewards of the resource and allow draggers to harvest it.

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