

SA YOUT

Winter 2015

Ideas, Facts, and Opinions for Today

Can't We House Everybody?

From time to time we hear about the lack of affordable housing for people on lower incomes. Newspaper articles appear, an item comes out on television, and the matter may receive attention in a speech by a politician. Then all goes quiet again.

Has the issue of affordable housing been solved? Not at all. It's simply not talked about all that much, even by left-leaning politicians.

In a presentation at the University of Toronto in June of 2013, Michael Shapcott of the Wellesley Institute stated that housing insecurity in the country was deep and persistent. He further noted that this imposed real costs on society. These costs come in the form of increased need for health care, increased legal costs, and more.

In 2014 we saw no great initiatives in housing for the less well off. Instead, we saw a boom in housing for the already well-housed.

In the spring of 2014 *The Guardian* reported that over eleven million homes across Europe stood empty. Those empty homes could have housed all the homeless in that continent twice over. Obviously, some sort of disconnect was at work. It is highly likely that we have a similar phenomenon in Canada.

It seemed that in many cases wealthier people and corporations are building or buying properties mainly for financial purposes. In many cases, properties are bought with the buyers having no intention of living in them. In London, a "billionaires row" has

emerged consisting of beautiful homes bought or invested in by absentee owners around the world. These expensive properties remain empty and too often are not properly maintained.

When properties become tangled up in the world of finance, prices almost always go up. This means that people with low incomes find it harder and harder to afford the limited housing that's available to them.

The question of affordable housing in Canada is not a new one. Paul Hellyer produced a report at the end of the 1960s addressing the issue. In 1971, the Croll Report from a special Senate committee, dealt directly with the question of affordable housing as did the Senate report of 2009 called "In from the Margins". Lots of paper has been used up and many earnest speeches delivered, but the fundamental issue remains the same. Our society just doesn't want to deal with the issue of affordable housing in a determined and sufficient way.

Could we afford to provide decent housing for everyone at an affordable cost? Of course. We don't because we've made deliberate decisions over the years not to do so. We've comfortably assumed that the free market would benefit everyone, and that people just had to be patient and good housing would be provided for all. Somehow, even after decades of waiting, it hasn't worked out that way.



Our flag day

On February 15, 1965, the maple leaf flag of Canada flew for the first time. Much controversy had preceded its official approval, but finally the country had a distinctive emblem all its own. February 15 of this year will mark the fiftieth anniversary of that occasion.

In the years prior to the raising of this new flag, Canada's distinctive flag had been the red ensign.

The red ensign had been approved in 1945 as a distinctive flag for use when a identifiably Canadian flag was needed. But it only had quasi-official status.

After it came down for the last time as Canada's flag, the red ensign was adopted by Ontario and Manitoba as their provincial flags with their provincial coats of arms in the fly.

The fundamental flag of Canada had been the union jack.

This had been Canada's flag from Confederation in 1867. But this was also Britain's flag, and it was not distinctly Canadian. To this day, however, the union jack is an official flag in Canada and can be flown for designated purposes (such as on the Queen's official birthday) alongside the maple leaf flag.

The union jack is distinctively incorporated into the provincial flags of British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Canada's maple leaf flag is recognized around the world and represents us very well. We can give it an extra salute this year.

Touring for health

In recent years we've had the increasing phenomenon of health tourism. People can now travel to India, Thailand, China, or other places to have medical procedures done in excellent surroundings and with top-notch professionals at a fraction of the cost of those same procedures in North America.

If you have the money, a world of good health care beckons.

Unfortunately, the ordinary people living in the area of these tourist health centres may themselves lack proper health care, simply because they lack the money to pay for it. Imagine the thoughts that go through their minds as they watch rich foreign tourists come in to receive health care they can only dream about.

In the new economy the ordinary people in those countries are obviously "losers". Might they also be resentful?

What is 'unemployment'?

"... unemployment figures underestimate the degree to which labor is being underutilized, since they exclude part-time workers who would like to work full-time, able-bodied workers who have given up looking for work or decided to get some more education instead, and workers nudged into retiring who are too old to have a realistic prospect of landing another full-time job."

Richard A. Posner
A Failure of Capitalism, 2009

Teaching on the cheap

About half the undergraduate classes in Canada's colleges and universities are now taught by contract teachers (CBC News Sep 7, 2014).

Many, if not most, of these teachers are in a precarious employment situation. They're usually paid poorly and have few employment rights.

When we're told repeatedly that education is important for our future well-being, does it make sense to deal with our teachers this way?

The Shanghai banking challenge

In September a major development took place in Shanghai, China. This involved the creation of the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank*. This bank, with 21 countries signed on, directly challenges the influence of the World Bank and the Asia Development Bank. Its initial capitalization in U.S. dollars was \$50-billion slated to increase in due course to \$100-billion.

In addition to China, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank receives support from Russia and other BRICS countries. (Australia, South Korea and Indonesia were pressured by the United States into not participating in the Shanghai launch. Japan did not attend either.)

China has major cash reserves at this point, amounting to trillions in renmimbi or dollars. It has also embarked on a mission to stockpile large reserves of gold and oil.

It now appears that China has launched an ambitious project designed to de-throne the U.S. dollar as the world's most dominant currency. The Chinese renmimbi will come into far more prominence. The consequences could be significant and disruptive on a global scale.

Canada, with her close ties to the United States, will undoubtedly feel the impact of China's financial and economic strategy in the next few years. That impact has the potential to be quite damaging.

We're in for even more interesting times as the world deals with the implications of the new financial reality.



What's coming down the track?

It's the cryosphere

The cryosphere is the frozen part of our world. It comprises glaciers, permafrost, and Arctic and Antarctic ice sheets and icebergs.

When scientists are concerned about the impact of climate change and the melting of ice or permafrost, they're concerned with the cryosphere as a whole, not just ice in the Arctic or Antarctic.

We should keep this in mind the next time a climate change denier breathlessly tells us ice has formed on the Antarctic ice sheet or in the Arctic Ocean. It's the cryosphere as a whole that must be examined. And, on the whole, it is in a state of melting down.

Who do we owe?

The federal debt now stands at about \$650-billion. Annual payments on this debt run at about \$28-billion. Who gets this debt money?

Mostly we pay the private banking sector each year. And, with compounding interest we manage to pay ever more as time goes by.

Our banks are truly profitable. Bay Street can rejoice.

Sayout

Sayout gives voice to those concerned about where we are in today's world and where we're headed. Here we can talk about issues affecting us right now – in Canada and around the world.

Agree or disagree, but *think*. What is really happening, and what do we need to do? Ask questions of those in power, demand action where it's needed, and don't be misled by saccharine promises or golden phrases meant to soothe, but nothing more..

E-versions of this newsletter are available for free. You just have to ask. No selling, no hassles!

Contact Robyn Peterson at:
petersonwrite@hotmail.com

Methane – solution or menace?

We're used to hearing about the problem of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere. But we haven't been hearing as much about methane. That could be starting to change.

Methane [CH₄] is a greenhouse gas. It is the main component of natural gas, but it can also exist on its own. In April of 2014 the BBC noted that methane is thirty times more damaging than carbon dioxide in its greenhouse impact.

As well as releasing large quantities of carbon dioxide, our thawing permafrost is releasing methane. The summer of 2014 saw mysterious holes appear in the earth's surface in Siberia. Scientists identified these holes as being made by methane forcing its way up from the thawing permafrost. This phenomenon had not been seen before.

Abundant quantities of methane exist in tiny frozen structures (methane hydrate) in the world's seas and oceans, mainly near the edges of the continental shelves. Methane hydrate is sometimes called "fire ice". The gas locked in the methane hydrate deposits could easily supply all the world's energy needs for some time to come, possibly centuries. There is a major problem, however, in figuring out how to tap into it without causing a catastrophic release of this powerful greenhouse gas.

Writing in the May 2014 issue of *The Atlantic*, Charles C. Mann noted that estimates were that the amount of methane hydrate in the world equated to at least one hundred times the amount of energy used by the United States in a year. Other estimates were much higher than this. Clearly, we're talking about a lot of potential fuel.

Interestingly, methane is also the main component of "swamp gas", which rises from marshy areas and also forms in garbage dumps containing concentrations of organic matter. Burning swamp gas has sometimes given rise to stories of mysterious unidentified flying objects.

When methane burns, it produces carbon dioxide and water. A lot of interest exists in the idea of using methane as a fuel, partly because it burns cleaner than coal or oil. Burning it would release carbon dioxide, but that would mean releasing a greenhouse gas of much less potency than methane on its own.

It seems that much depends on how well methane hydrate can be contained and controlled in use. Research is ongoing in the United States, Canada and Japan and other countries to find out how methane might form a part of our energy future, perhaps a major part.

The threat of a new Cold War is real

By October of 2014 it appeared that Russia had a clear edge on the United States in the area of nuclear threat. The Russians then had a little over 1600 nuclear missiles ready to launch. The Americans had a little over 1500.

Reports stated that Russia had more than 8,000 warheads, whilst the Americans had 7,000.

It's sobering, perhaps, to recognize that about a dozen large nuclear warheads could basically wipe out Canada. Such warheads could be launched by one or two submerged submarines from virtually anywhere in the world.

The numbers of nuclear warheads today are much lower than the levels reached at the height of the Cold War, but we now have more nations with nuclear weapons. All these nukes pose a serious worry as they represent continuing efforts by the Russians and Americans and others to update their nuclear arsenals and their nuclear delivery systems.

The British, French, North Koreans and Israelis have much smaller arsenals and delivery capabilities, as do the Chinese, Pakistanis and Indians. But they are continuing to work on improving their nuclear capabilities.

The crisis in Ukraine is ongoing, and with all the disinformation and accusations bandied about, it could easily become the starting place for a new Cold War, just as the Balkans was the starting place for the Great War in 1914.

Now is a time for careful and intelligent handling of international affairs. Restraint and genuine efforts at diplomacy are needed. It is definitely not a time for macho posturing or noisy saber rattling by any of the world's nuclear nations or their allies. That was the kind of behaviour that brought on the guns of August in 1914.

The world could do without a new Cold War. We were lucky to avoid mutual annihilation in the last one. Would we be so lucky in a new one?



What do you mean you don't like winter?

Elections PR

"When assigned the task of selling candidates, the PR industry naturally resorts to the same techniques as in marketing commodities. Deceit is employed to undermine democracy, just as it is a natural device to undermine markets."

Naom Chomski
Failed States, 2006



Where will this train take me?

Consumer sovereignty?

"Belief in a market economy in which the consumer is sovereign is one of our most pervasive forms of fraud."

John Kenneth Galbraith,
The Economics of Innocent Fraud, 2004.

Are you selfish?

Most people aren't keen to be labelled as "selfish". They know it's not considered to be polite. Still, what if marketers and investors believe that people are mostly selfish? Will they seek to appeal to our supposed selfish natures?

Do people respond to the idea that they can have certain things that are denied to others? Is this an aspect of individualism that shouldn't be discussed in polite company?

The next time you read an advertisement or view a commercial, decide if it's appealing to something selfish in your nature. If it does, are you pleased or offended? That may give you an idea of whether or not you enjoy being selfish.

People are often encouraged to invest their money in financial products or share purchases that will give them extraordinary returns. Part of the inducement for such investments may be that they're exclusive to you. They may also allow you to profit where others don't. In other words, you can have some extra money while others can't.

When you think about it, selfishness exists all around us. If selfishness is being deliberately encouraged, is that a good thing? Does the world really need more and more selfishness?

Canada's Promises to the International Community – What did They Mean?

We know that Canada has an excellent reputation in the world as a compassionate and progressive country. We don't always reflect, though, on what built our reputation in the world. Perhaps we should.

Canada joined with fifty other nations in San Francisco in October of 1945 to found the United Nations. We had taken a prominent role in the Second World War and had developed the view that we needed to do our bit to make the world a better, more peaceful place. The United Nations fitted Canada's postwar aims very well.

In keeping with the spirit of the early postwar years, the United Nations produced the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Canada played a prominent role in the drafting of this document. In succeeding years covenants were added to this document. By the mid-1960s, key documents had been agreed that formed the *International Bill of Rights*. These documents were:

- ◆ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (UDHR) 1948.
- ◆ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (ICCPR) 1966.
- ◆ The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (ICESC) 1966.

Canada had fully ratified *The International Bill of Rights* by the mid-1970s. In effect, we were promising that Canadians would enjoy these rights in full with the support of

government policies and our legal system.

The *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, a part of the *International Bill of Rights*, was approved by the United Nations in 1966. It had legal force from the beginning of January, 1976. This Covenant remains highly relevant to human rights in Canada today. Among other things it sets out articles and sub-sections that bear directly on poverty and issues of social equity.

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights gives a good flavour of the content of the *International Bill of Rights*.

1. *The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.*

It seems fair to ask in 2015: *Has Canada lived up to her solemn promises to the world community almost fifty years ago? Or have we lost something along the way?*

If we lost something along the way, *is it still possible for us to regain what we have lost?*

Who's teaching the doctors?

"Doctors around the world – except in Norway – are taught which drugs are best by the drug companies themselves."

Ben Goldacre,
Bad Pharma, 2012

Ethics at the Top Matter

Unethical behaviour in the higher levels of society does have real economic and social impact for everyone. And that impact may well be harmful. We are right to examine closely the ethics of our leaders.