

SAYOUT

Canada and the world

Fall 2015

Ideas, Facts, and Opinions for Today

Make sure everyone has a decent income

Poverty is deprivation. It saps the soul and spreads discouragement. In a society that prides itself on caring for others and considers itself to be so prosperous and fortunate, poverty stands out like an ugly and indelible stain. Many people turn away and refuse to look at the stain. But it remains.

Regularly, people in high places will say we need to do something about poverty. A few adjustments here and there and a few concessions may be introduced. Almost always these are mere sops, measures dressed up to look good on the surface, but that fail miserably to address the problem. Poverty remains. The stain remains.

In Ontario the social assistance and disability allowance systems are supposed to free people from poverty. But they do not. Existing social assistance rates in Ontario leave adult recipients at a level of 43% of the low-income cutoff (LICO) level. For disabled single adults the level is a bit better at 69% of the LICO. Still not enough.

In Ontario in 2014 the poverty line for a single person was an income level of \$18,669.00 per year according to *Ontario Social Services*.

The yell of "get a job" is sometimes heard when people ask for relief from poverty. Doug Ford, brother of Toronto's then mayor, snarled out these words to a poverty delegation at Toronto's City Hall several years ago. A job can certainly help — if the jobs are there to be had. But these days people may live in poverty even though they have jobs. We live in an age of precarious employment.

In an article in *The Toronto Star* (Jan 3, 2010), James Morton noted that the average annual cost of keeping a federal inmate in prison in 2009 was \$93,030. That's not bad were it a pay level, well above the median wage for an individual (\$27,600 in 2011) in Canada.

One wonders how many people might have avoided becoming criminals in the first place if they had received incomes that amounted to a fraction of the cost of keeping them locked up in prison.

One solution to eliminating most of the poverty that now exists would be to make sure everyone has a livable income. They would have a basic income guarantee, just as suggested in the Senate report *In From the Margins* at the end of 2009.

The provinces and the federal government would have to work together to make this happen. There's little reason why they couldn't do so.

Poverty, especially in a wealthy country, is evil. It is an unnecessary evil. As stated in a press release in February of 2013: "*Canada isn't living up to its potential or its reputation when it comes to societal issues like poverty, government and inequality, according to the Conference Board of Canada.*" (CBC News)

Isn't it time for Canada to live up to its potential when it comes to poverty? We can make sure everyone has a decent income. We can provide a basic income guarantee to all our citizens. We should remove the stain of poverty once and for all. It's possible and it's right.

What are you voting for?



Robyn Peterson

Many people react with a groan to the idea of an election. Some may even say, "So what?" Too many people are just plain jaded by the idea. Still, your vote does count, and getting yourself out to vote is important. In other parts of the world people are putting their lives on the line to be able to vote. Being able to vote freely is fundamentally important.

A major problem with getting out to vote concerns the question of: "Who do I vote for?" Some people just shrug and say, "They're all crooks!" That can be satisfying emotionally, but it doesn't deal with the fundamental question. And simply not voting at all is just plain useless. Back room political planners may even count on you not voting as they plot the voting strengths of different neighbourhoods.

Think about the issues you feel strongly about. Make a list of items you think are important. Talk with your friends. See what they think. And don't limit yourself to what the different parties are saying.

Work with these ideas or ideas of your own to construct your list. Once you've done so, check out what the candidates in your riding are saying or promising. The better their ideas fit with the ideas on your list, the more you might be inclined to vote for a particular candidate, regardless of party affiliation.

What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?

One of the keys to having a real democracy is the knowledge of the citizens. When people know and understand what's going on around them, they can make informed choices, including casting their votes for the policies and programs they believe will benefit them most.

If people are to be informed citizens, their information sources must be widespread, objective, easy to access, and complete. Our media matter greatly in all of this. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the internet are our primary sources of information – although the print media are slowly falling off.

In effect, our media form a vital, some would say indispensable, support for our democratic system.

For our own well-being and our own role as voting citizens, ownership of our media becomes an important question. As the old saying goes, "He that pays the piper calls the tune." If the payers are calling tunes that are pleasing to them, can we be sure that those tunes provide true democratic melodies? Do those melodies enhance our democracy or do they hinder it? Might they even involve marching songs designed to support points of view that are not really in the interests of most people?

In August of 2012 the Huffington Post reported that the concentration of television media ownership in Canada was the worst in the G8. Television is a major source of news for most Canadians.

Bell Media then controlled 28.6% of the TV viewing market. That cor-

poration won approval from the CRTC (Canadian Radio and Television Commission) in 2013 to merge with Astral to gain a TV viewing market of 36.8%.

The other major media players in Canada are Rogers, Shaw, and Quebecor. Along with Bell Media, they own the lion's share of private media in Canada.

Additional media players such as Torstar, Post Media, and Corus do exist, but on a much smaller scale.

In the public sector we have such giants as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Radio Canada and Television Ontario (TVO). These public services have a minority position in overall television ownership in Canada.

Over the years it seems that the public sector television broadcasters may not be as independent or objective as one would like them to be. The CBC, for instance, has seen regular cuts in its financial allocations from the federal government during the years of the Harper government. Top executives at this corporation must exercise political caution in their programming decisions, especially when criticisms of the government could be involved.

In the end we're left with troublesome questions: Are Canadians as informed as they should be about their country and the world in general? Are we subject to media manipulation? If so, on whose behalf is that manipulation taking place? These are important concerns. How should we be dealing with them?



Robyn Peterson

But is he smiling?

Government for the majority?

In the 2011 general election in Canada 61.1% of those eligible to vote actually cast their ballots. Here are the percentage results of those ballots:

Conservatives	39.6%
NDP	30.6%
Liberals	18.9%
Bloc Québécois	6.1%
Green	3.9%

The Conservatives under Stephen Harper received a 'plurality' of the vote. This enabled them to form a "majority" government.

Did this 'majority' government actually do what the majority of Canadians wanted it to do?

We will see judgement rendered in the middle of October.

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

No systematic evidence

"There is no systematic evidence that tax cuts are the road to economic growth or that low taxes for corporations or the rich produce jobs."

Alex Himmelfarb and Jordan Himmelfarb
Tax is not a four-letter word, 2013

Healthy 3D printing

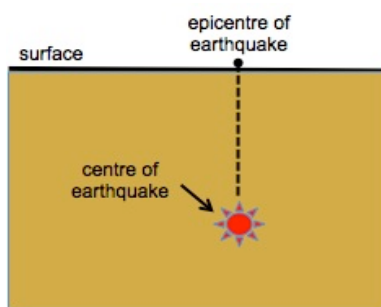
Exact 3D models of a patient's organs can now be produced using 3D printers (with assistance from MRI scans). These models let surgeons plan their operations in precise detail before carrying out those operations. Surgical outcomes are improving dramatically as a result.

Is that the 'epicentre'?

The word "epicentre" originated within the field of geology specifically for use in the case of earthquakes or underground explosions.

The epicentre was the centre on the surface of an earthquake. This differed from the centre of the earthquake, which was the focus of the event deep below the epicentre.

The same usage applied to any kind of underground explosion. So, for earthquakes or explosions, you had two centres, one on the surface and one at the actual centre of the upheaval.



The geological definition is still the primary and preferred dictionary definition. In recent years, however, the use of the word epicentre as a substitute for centre has gradually crept in, although on an informal basis.

Reporters now routinely talk about the *epicentre* of a riot or the *epicentre* of some sort of controversy. Slowly, it seems the word is losing its specialized meaning related to underground disruptive events. Does its use in these other contexts add something meaningful to our understanding?

We can speculate on the reasons for *epicentre's* wandering out of the linguistic toolbox of geologists and other scientists. Perhaps it's because the word trips happily along the tongue. Maybe it sounds more portentous than a mere "centre". Still, it adds two syllables to the word "centre". Are those extra syllables really necessary to good reporting?

Is it possible that we might put this word back into strictly scientific usage again? We can but hope and try. After all, the word "centre" remains perfectly usable.

The \$2 money flow

A little over fifty years ago, a base commander for a military base in the Maritimes became quite concerned about local complaints about military personnel. People in the community complained about all the soldiers in their streets.

The commander hit upon an idea. For the next pay parade at the base he arranged for the troops to receive their pay almost entirely in two-dollar bills.

Suddenly, the town was flooded with two-dollar bills in different stores and for different commercial activities, such as restaurants and taxis.

All those two-dollar bills were hard to ignore. Having so many soldiers on the streets no longer seemed such a bother.

The townspeople learned clearly that a significant amount of their cash flow came from the military. Removing that cash flow would have meant a sharp drop in sales in the town's stores along with increased unemployment as sales staff and others were no longer needed.

Austerity measures take money out of the economy. This means decreased sales and increased unemployment -- at least until the private sector fills the gap. But what if the private sector doesn't fill the gap?

What if the private sector recoils at the drop in sales in the marketplace and decides not to expand or even to cut back?

Perhaps, like soldiers in the streets, government spending is more important in our economy than many like to think. And perhaps government austerity leads nowhere but to a shrinking economy.



Robyn Peterson

Will it be smooth sailing ahead?

A long-term problem

"... an ignorant public is the long-term problem in American public life."

Susan Jacoby,
The Age of American Unreason, 2008

Who's ignorant — and why?

During one of her lectures at University College in Toronto in June of 2015, Sydney White wrote the following on the chalkboard:

"Ignorance does not mean you are illiterate, it means you know and see what is happening, but you have chosen to ignore it. Ignorance is a choice, a lifestyle."

Perhaps you know someone who lives the lifestyle of ignorance. Tune out the world. Don't listen to anything that seems depressing. See only what's attractive. Could that be you?

Sydney is known for her controversial views. *But is she correct here?*

If you choose not to see certain things going on around you or refuse to listen to certain points of view, then you're certainly making a choice.

In her thoughtful book, *Willful Blindness* (Doubleday Canada, 2011), Margaret Heffernan says:

"We make ourselves powerless when we choose not to know. But we give ourselves hope when we insist on looking."

If we insist on looking into things, we might just find out more.

It's possible that we might be tricked into ignorance by the machinations of others (friends? politicians? corporations? the media? institutions?). We should remain aware of this possibility at all times.

Remaining ignorant should never be a choice, no matter how comfortable it might feel. Probing into things makes sense, no matter what source you might be dealing with. You can never be certain whose agenda might be at work, at least at first. And the real agenda might not be to your liking at all.

In today's world ignorance is not bliss — it is folly.



Robyn Peterson

We've got colour out there

Our seas of acid

Carbon falling on the world's oceans is producing large quantities of carbonic acid, the acid found in carbonated soft drinks.

Careful measurements over time show that the acidity of the world's seas and oceans is slowly increasing.

Increasing acidification of our seas and oceans threatens many forms of sea life, including fish stocks and coral reefs.

Our food supplies from the waters around us are slowly becoming less plentiful.

Conventional Wisdom

Conventional wisdom provides us with a powerful form of thinking. Because it's shared widely and acknowledged by many, if not most, people, it gives us a large base of thought we can dip into whenever we wish.

Working within the precepts of conventional wisdom can be comfortable and reassuring. But conventional wisdom can be wrong. This is one of the sad lessons of history. Unless it's tested with good evidence, conventional wisdom can lead us far astray.

A worrying delusion

"Since the global turn to austerity in 2010, every country that introduced significant austerity has seen its economy suffer, with the depth of the suffering closely related to the harshness of the austerity."

Paul Krugman,
The Austerity Delusion,
The Guardian, April 29, 2015

Doom you say?



In August of 1945 a staggering change in human affairs occurred. The Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were devastated by atomic bombs. Days later Japan surrendered unconditionally, and the Second World War was over.

The United States emerged from the war as the world's first atomic power.

The Americans believed they could hold back the mighty Soviet army in Europe with the threat of atomic retaliation. B-36 bombers could carry atomic bombs deep into Soviet territory.

In 1949 Western complacency was shattered when the Russians exploded their first atomic bomb. In the United States a furious hunt for traitors and spies ensued. The infamous McCarthy hearings hunted out Communists and supposed Communists in government and elsewhere. Many lives were wrecked as a result.

In 1947, scientists who had been involved with developing the atomic bomb came up with the idea of the Domsday Clock. Initially, they set its minute hand at seven minutes to midnight, the hour of the world's doom. They wanted a graphic symbol of the danger the world faced with the dawn of the atomic age.

When the Soviets exploded their first atomic bomb, the minute hand on the Domsday Clock moved forward swiftly to three minutes to midnight. The Cold War was by then fully underway.

Things became even more dangerous in 1952 and 1953 when the United States and the Soviet Union successfully detonated hydrogen bombs. These bombs were many times more powerful than atomic bombs. The Domsday Clock then was set at two minutes to midnight, the most dangerous setting yet.

In 1963 the Domsday Clock showed twelve minutes to midnight, its best setting to date. This occurred after the United States and the Soviet Union signed a treaty strictly limiting atmospheric testing of nuclear devices.

By 1980, the Domsday Clock stood at seven minutes to midnight after the revolution in Iran and war in the Sinai had increased tensions and threatened oil supplies.

In 1988 the United States and the Soviet Union signed a treaty eliminated intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs). The clock was set back to six minutes to midnight as a result.

In 1991 the Soviet Union dissolved and the Domsday Clock went to seventeen minutes to midnight. This was the most "peaceful" setting the clock has ever shown.

In 2007 the Domsday Clock moved forward to five minutes to midnight as North Korea became a nuclear power, joining India and Pakistan as one of the newer members of the nuclear club.

By 2010 the clock had fallen back to six minutes to midnight as hope for international treaties seemed justified.

Early in 2015, however, the clock was advanced to three minutes to midnight, the same setting as in 1949 early in the Cold War. Climate change, nuclear proliferation, nuclear modernization programs, wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, and elsewhere now pose significant threats to the world. Doom has moved uncomfortably closer.

Some question the validity of the Domsday Clock. Still, it reminds us of the perils faced by the world as a whole. Is it true that we're now closer to doom? Should we be worried? Let's just think.