

SAYOUT

Canada and the world

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Ideas, Facts, and Opinions for Today

What about volunteering?

The word "volunteer" has a positive ring to it. We can picture people volunteering to do needed tasks or to tackle calamitous events, such as flooding. Many public figures extol the virtues of volunteering and, indeed, call for more of it.

Might we ask a delicate question? Is volunteering always a good thing? Are there times when volunteering might actually impede or prevent actions that are really needed?

Consider the story of food banks. These have been with us now for over thirty years. They rely on voluntary donations of food and the unpaid work of volunteers to make their contribution to the serious food needs of different communities. Their existence is wonderful and noble in its own right. But does their very existence actually impede the creation of more comprehensive and nutritious solutions for those in need? It is not unknown for politicians in different areas to curb public expenses for different possible food programs on the basis that food banks exist. In effect, they're saying, 'Voluntary organizations will come to the rescue so why should government be involved?'

Statistics Canada reports that in 2013 volunteers contributed almost two billion hours of unpaid work. If we think of a minimum wage of ten dollars an hour, that translates into a contribution of about \$20-billion to the economy. That unpaid work equated to about one million full-time jobs, most of which would likely have been above minimum wage rates.

The pressures to volunteer are per-

vasive. Organizations, including the government, will regularly boast about how much money they save by not paying people. This seems a strange, even cruel, kind of boast when you consider the degree of inequality that now exists in our society and the large number of people subsisting on low incomes.

For people in positions of power who don't like paying wages, using unpaid volunteers can be an irresistible way to go. Unpaid workers – wonderful!

In some cases, people in power may even call for paid workers to be replaced by unpaid volunteers. This means *job substitution*.

Statistics Canada notes that the number of volunteers in 2013 was less than in 2010: 12.7-million as opposed to 13.2-million earlier. This 4% decline occurred even as our population has grown. Does it represent a trend, or is it a statistical blip?

One thing we can note for sure: volunteering is not something we can take for granted. Further, too much reliance on unpaid volunteers may actually have some detrimental impacts on our society. Asking or cajoling people to work for nothing may well entail negative consequences over time.

When it comes to the question of thinking about volunteers and voluntary work, careful consideration is needed. Calling for volunteers may not always be the wisest approach. It may even be a morally bankrupt approach.

Volunteering? – maybe.



Robyn Peterson

A gathering of volunteers.

The palliation factor

Any charitable group, including a church-based group, can slip into a palliative way of operating. So they might provide some symptomatic relief to those in need, but they don't usually deal with underlying causes.

Tax requirements tend to push voluntary organizations towards being palliative and not action-oriented in what they do.

Palliative work is necessary work, and we should be thankful to those who provide it. The problem, though, is that just having palliative efforts will not address fundamental or systemic issues. They might even inadvertently prolong the very problems they seek to address.

Raise the wages

"What is really needed is not lower wages, but lower debt levels – and paradoxically that can be achieved by increasing wages. A boost to money wages during a depression can cause inflation far more effectively than 'printing money,' and this inflation can reduce the real debt burden."

Steve Keen

Debunking Economics, 2011

Where's the gold?

Over many centuries gold was central to the workings of the economy. The quest for gold lured the conquistadors into the Americas in search of gold. Even today treasure hunters search for the sunken wrecks of Spanish ships that were laden with gold.



In 1971 President Nixon removed the last vestige of the old gold standard for the U.S. dollar. Since then, gold has apparently been dethroned from its historic role in the world of money and international commerce.

And yet, and yet.

Different countries today are busy building up their reserves of gold. This includes Russia and China. It also includes Germany and various other countries. If gold has lost its role as a viable form of money, why are these countries so interested in it?

Here are the national holdings of gold (as measured by the World Gold Council in 2015) for the top 10 "gold" countries in the world:

Rank	Country	Gold (tonnes) March 2015
1	United States	8,133.5 tonnes
2	Germany	3,384.2
3	IMF	2,814.0
4	Italy	2,451.8
5	France	2,435.4
6	Russia	1,207.7
7	China	1,054.1
8	Switzerland	1,040.0
9	Japan	765.2
10	Netherlands	612.5

According to this chart, the United States has the largest stockpile of gold in the world by far. Some dispute this however. No recent audits have been conducted to confirm the amount of gold held in Fort Knox for instance. When Germany wanted its gold back from the New York Federal Reserve a couple of years ago, it received explanations instead, and a fraction of the amount of gold supposedly held in trust.

Canada does not rank among the

top ten countries for holding gold. In the 1980s we basically swore off the idea of having gold reserves. Today we might have about three tonnes of it. That doesn't even place us in the top 50 countries for stockpiles of gold.

The global monetary system is now based overwhelmingly on fiat money, money that comes into existence because an authority such as a government or a bank says it does. Tens of trillions of dollars of derivatives now float around the world based on fiat money. Ultimately, fiat money depends on trust. The merchant trusts that the twenty dollar bill you produce in payment for a certain item is a sufficient means of paying for that item. Further, she trusts that the bank will accept that twenty dollar bill for deposit in her business account.

Despite all that fiat money, gold continues to play a role in the international calculus of money and trade, although that role is subtle.

Given the possible shocks to the world's monetary system that might lie in the future, the position of gold in the planning of various governments becomes increasingly relevant. Why do countries such as China, Russia, Germany, and others consider it important to have significant reserves of gold? Are they concerned about a monetary catastrophe around the corner?

In the end we know that gold has value in its own right. It still has some influence on international monetary considerations. It retains its value for use in monetary emergencies. And it has a place in building confidence in a nation's economic well-being.

For Canada, it just might make sense to rebuild our gold stockpile to the point where we at least place among the top twenty gold-holding countries. That could provide us with a useful edge for the turbulent economic times that probably lie ahead.



Robyn Peterson

Whatever you do, don't pull the big plug in the head (toilet).

True money

"Outright physical gold ownership without pledges or liens, stored outside the banking system, is the only form of gold that is true money, since every other form is a mere conditional claim on gold."

James Rickards
The Death of Money, 2014

The Precautionary Principle

When a reasonable suspicion of harm exists about a given technology along with scientific uncertainty about cause and effect in that technology, we must err on the side of caution.

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 sacharine promises or golden phrases meant to soothe but nothing more.

This newsletter is free in its e-version form.

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That entrepreneurial flair

The word "entrepreneur" has a certain cachet. It carries with it the notion of someone who is a cut above others, who takes bold risks to make lots of money. Various agencies love the term. They'll talk breezily about the wonders of being an entrepreneur, being your own boss. The whole entrepreneurial concept becomes seductive. Perhaps we should all strive to become entrepreneurs!

There is no doubt that some highly successful entrepreneurs have achieved much success and made loads of money into the bargain. But is all sunshine and brightness? Not quite.

In line with the thinking of management guru, Peter Drucker, you don't become an entrepreneur just by describing yourself as being an entrepreneur. Even if you set up and run a business of your own, that doesn't automatically make you an entrepreneur.

The true entrepreneur in Drucker's sense needs a gift for innovation. This element is indispensable. Entrepreneurship and innovation go hand in hand.

When you come up with a new angle on an existing idea or way of doing things or think of a new product or service to fill a need not previously exploited by others, you're thinking in an entrepreneurial way.

Some entrepreneurs will become so successful that they set up franchises for the particular product or service they've pioneered. Their franchisees, though, are not automatically entrepreneurs because they're not the ones who came up with the unique idea that built the innovative product or service.

Franchisees must be good managers and carefully toe the corporate line in all its details. Over time, if they develop new approaches of their own (with the approval of the franchiser) they may become entrepreneurs in their own right. But that will not automatically be the case. They could simply continue as good man-

agers which, in itself, is definitely worthwhile.

People often associate the word "entrepreneur" with risk, and risk does enter the picture. But the risks involved with entrepreneurial activity are normally calculated risks, not reckless gambles.

Being entrepreneurial does not mean taking foolish risks.

When people are told that setting up or running a small business makes them entrepreneurs, they may be misled. Owning and operating a small business can be worthwhile and fulfilling. But it may not automatically mean being an entrepreneur.

Can everyone become an entrepreneur? That's an interesting question without an easy answer. People can certainly learn about entrepreneurship, but that doesn't guarantee that they'll become entrepreneurs. That elusive entrepreneurial flair might just not be in their make-up.

People can learn to improve their business skills. They can improve their ability to start up and operate small businesses. But this kind of learning, worthwhile in its own right, will not necessarily produce entrepreneurs, although it may produce better managers or business owners.

In the end, entrepreneurs are the people who come up with new or innovative products or develop new and better ways of doing things. A thriving society needs them. But the true entrepreneurs in our world are a small minority. Most of us will be happy to achieve fulfilment in our personal lives and satisfaction in our work. We may not become entrepreneurs in Drucker's sense, but we can become contented all the same.

That special entrepreneurial flair should certainly be encouraged when it occurs. When people show entrepreneurial promise, we should look for ways to fulfil that promise. That will benefit the budding entrepreneurs, and it will likely benefit the rest of us as well.

Let us really see them

"Indigenous people are already there, at the core of our civilization. That is our reality. Our challenge is to learn how to recognize what we have trained ourselves not to see."

John Ralston Saul
Canada: A Fair Country, 2009

Euro destiny

The 1992 Maastricht Treaty provided for the creation of the Eurozone in Europe with the Euro as its currency.

The European Union had 28 member states in 1992, but only 19 of them chose to join the Eurozone.

Germany is the central driver for this economic structure. For this reason, the Eurozone is generally managed with the needs of the German economy given primary attention.

Germany's dominance may well be setting the stage for some serious European upheavals to come. The situation in Greece is but a prelude.

A need for debt audits

The nascent global movement for debt audits may well contain the seeds of a new internationalism – an internationalism for today – in the working classes throughout the world. This is, among other things, a consequence of financialisation. Thus debt audits might provide a fertile ground for renewed forms of international mobilisations and solidarity.

The Guardian, June 9, 2014



Robyn Peterson

Did someone pull the wrong plug?

Generating with thorium

Generating electricity using nuclear generating stations is widespread in the world today. France generates most of its electricity using nuclear power. Nuclear power generation occupies a major position in Ontario as well. And nuclear power generation is undergoing resurgence in the United States.

Nuclear power generation can be enticing for governments intent on meeting their energy needs with much less or no dependence on fossil fuels. Indeed, more than a few environmentalists advocate for more use of nuclear energy precisely because it has no carbon footprint. But it does have radioactivity, and we know about the dangerous issues that can arise with radioactivity.

The disaster at Fukushima in 2011 has caused serious rethinking about nuclear-based power in Japan and elsewhere. It has also come to symbolize the dangers of nuclear power generation, dangers already revealed by the incident at Three Mile Island in the 1970s and the major disaster at Chernobyl in the 1980s.

One significant possibility does exist that could render nuclear generating plants much safer, wherever they may be located. This is the possibility of substituting thorium for uranium as the fuel for nuclear reactors.

Thorium is much less useful for making nuclear weapons. Its use in generating facilities would sharply lessen the dangers from radioactivity and nuclear weapons proliferation. For these reasons and more, thorium could make nuclear power generation more appealing as an energy source. With the right preparation, thorium could replace uranium for power generation.

Thorium occurs naturally, and Canada has a good supply of this metal. Additionally, Canadian-designed nuclear reactors may be particularly adaptable to using thorium as their fuel.

Research is continuing on the best ways to use thorium in existing nuclear generating plants. India has moved ahead with research into this metal, and Indonesia plans to use thorium-based generating for its power needs on a large scale.

In time, thorium could become the main fuel source in most of the world's existing nuclear power stations. This would sharply reduce the risks associated with nuclear generation on a global scale.

Canada could certainly explore using thorium for nuclear generation in a much more active way. This could provide an important boost to our economy and lead us to become world leaders in the technologies involved.

What about the bottom?

In 2012, the bottom 30% of Canadians accounted for less than 1% of all wealth; the bottom 50% combined controlled less than 6%.

The Broadbent Institute, September 2014

Meditation

Some people are uncomfortable with the idea of meditating. They may have mental images of strange people clustered in mysterious places doing weird things or making unusual noises.

The truth is that meditating and meditation are perfectly straightforward processes. In fact, we all engage in meditation from time to time even if we don't realize it.

Different studies over the years have shown that meditation has positive effects on us, physically and mentally. It's definitely a good path to follow to counter stress.

Meditation doesn't have to take a lot of time—a few minutes can provide benefits. And you can meditate almost anywhere.

Try the following:

1. Position yourself comfortably (possibly lying down).
2. Close your eyes or fix on a placid scene.
3. Put yourself into a relaxed state, perhaps with a breathing exercise.
4. De-focus your mind—try to think of nothing at all.
5. Be and let emerge what will emerge in your mind.

That's it. No fuss, no muss. You can meditate for a minute or so or for half and hour or more. And you can meditate several times a day. And it's good for you!



Robyn Peterson

What lies out there?

How much might you pay for the ambulance?

If you collapse on a downtown street and are rushed off to hospital by the paramedics, you may later be presented with a significant bill just for riding in the ambulance. *The Canada Health Act* is unclear about ambulances or paramedics, so these services are not automatically covered by the various provincial or territorial health insurance programs.

If you have an accident or suffer a serious medical emergency in the wrong place, it could cost you. But you'll be reassured the system might save money.

Democratic necessity

We've learned from an early age that democracy is important, and that it's worth fighting for. But what is it — really?

Democracy is the system human societies establish to allow all citizens a fair and meaningful say in their own government. Unless a democratic system prevails, people are governed by those who can seize and hold onto power. And those usurpers of power are likely to govern in arbitrary ways.

When people enthusiastically attack 'government', are they also attacking democracy itself?