

SAYOUT

Canada and the world

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Ideas, Facts, and Opinions for Today

Conditioned responses in our lives

We live in a world of punishment, rewards, and indifference. In effect, we have a conditioned society. We tend to do what we do because of the results we get. Given this reality, an important question arises: *Are conditioning efforts deliberately being used by a powerful elite to push us in the direction chosen by that elite?*

We are conditioned much more than we may consciously realize. For this reason we should do our best to identify conditioning when it's happening. This takes conscious effort, because conditioning is often covert. In some cases the conditioning we experience may subtly be pushing us in an undesirable direction.

Rewards of different kinds are key instruments in the process of conditioning. What human beings find rewarding, of course, can be quite diverse and complicated. But the theory of positive reinforcement as applied to people says that people will respond to rewards in tangible and productive ways.

If you schedule those rewards in a sequenced way towards set goals, then you may well get the results you want.

As a tool, positive reinforcement seems to offer the ultimate means of managing people and turning them into good, productive employees virtually without their realizing what's happening. Similarly, they might be turned into good consumers of various products or good supporters for different political parties. They acquire the correct conditioned responses.

Consider the political arena. What

do voters find rewarding? In recent decades, the magic mantra has become "tax cuts" and getting rid of government wherever possible. The idea can be sold that people will have more money to spend on the things they value without government interference. They can be rewarded accordingly for their votes. At the same time, they may not notice the downside of the cuts in government spending that occur.

Bridges silently deteriorate in their structural supports. Sewers become cracked and overburdened. Water mains rupture and cause large holes suddenly to appear in the middle of roads along with gushing fountains of water. More people may be driven into poverty. But these things are often out of sight, out of mind. The tax cuts become the food pellets to reward appropriate behaviour.

We all have conditioned responses to the stimuli that surround us every day. The question is: *How, exactly, were those responses conditioned into us?* Did we do it ourselves? Or were rewards of different kinds used by others to set us on the paths that they chose for us?

Breaking free from your conditioning can be difficult. But the first step is to recognize that you may well have been conditioned to engage in certain things or to think in certain ways.

When we identify conditioned responses in ourselves that we wish to change, we must look for the rewards that will help us move onto other paths. We can then self-condition our responses into paths of our own choosing instead of the paths chosen for us by others.

A TISA for you

The never-ending parade of deals to cement the world into an inescapable neoliberal frame for the benefit of large corporations continues. So far, the Trudeau government seems more than happy to oblige in this cementing.

The acronym TISA stands for "Trade in Services Agreement". It is designed to provide ironclad guarantees for international services of various kinds such as management or banking services. This agreement would limit and even prevent the setting up of public banks in signatory countries. In Canada's case this could eliminate the possibility of a return to postal banking or having the Bank of Canada engage robustly in public financing as it did before 1974.

Under TISA the long-standing concept of 'natural monopolies' will go out the window. So electricity, water, public transit, and more will potentially be opened to private ownership and exploitation.

Although Canada is supposed to be a democracy, ordinary Canadians are not being actively or sincerely consulted about joining this agreement. Instead, it seems that they will be 'instructed' by their betters as to why it's good for them.

What are you accessing?

"The greater accessibility of information through computers and the Internet serves to foster the illusion that the ability to retrieve words and numbers with the click of a mouse also confers the capacity to judge whether those words and numbers represent truth, lies, or something in between."

Susan Jacoby
The Age of American Unreason, 2008,

The challenge of cryptocurrencies

For many years now, most of the money in our economy has existed on various computer networks. So if one bank makes a loan payment to another, it makes an electronic transfer. The birth of cryptocurrencies (also called cyber-currencies) has taken the digital existence of money one step further. Today the pre-eminent form of such money by far is Bitcoin.

Bitcoin came into being in 2009 under somewhat murky circumstances. In effect, Bitcoin is a line of computer code that can travel from one person to another. Transactions can take place anonymously. Different exchanges maintain the system as a whole. They can act as 'miners' to bring new Bitcoins into existence using special algorithms. This process is not easy and produces Bitcoins within a tight digital framework. The deliberate use of the term 'miners' underscores the idea of there being a parallel between the 'discovery' of Bitcoins and the discovery and mining of gold.

The exchanges track all transactions using a 'blockchain' system. This system, which operates anonymously, ensures that each Bitcoin is used one transaction at a time only by the legitimate owners. The miners themselves earn money by receiving Bitcoins from time to time for their efforts.

You can buy Bitcoins from exchanges and keep them in a digital location called a wallet. You can also use Bitcoins to buy things from those willing to accept them. Different 'smart' devices can be useful for this kind of transacting.

A few years ago, Bitcoins were valued at about US \$400 each. Now their value is in the region of US \$4,000 per coin and up. It's worth more than gold.

Given its anonymous nature and its existence beyond the control of governments or banks, Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies have slowly increased in popularity, especially for those people who value transaction anonymity and the use of money out-

side the 'official' money transaction systems. This would appeal to those who wish to keep their money hidden from official eyes. Libertarians find this appealing also, as do anarchists. Unfortunately, criminals, such as drug lords or arms dealers, are lured by the appeal as well.

A few years ago an exchange in Japan called Mt. Cox 'lost' hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of Bitcoins. The owners of those Bitcoins were, naturally, very upset. Mark Karpeles, the CEO of Mt. Cox, could not explain what had happened to all the money, although he did later 'find' 200,000 Bitcoins in 'cold storage', which he turned over to trustees. This left 650,000 Bitcoins still unaccounted for. It appeared that a major hack had occurred.

In 2016 reports emerged that Bitcoins to the value of US \$78-million had been stolen from the Bitfinex exchange in Hong Kong. Unknown hackers had apparently made away with this money from the wallets of Bitcoin users.

Clearly, Bitcoins and other cryptocurrencies are not completely safe. So people must use some caution in working with them. Still, actual thefts of these currencies are quite rare. So the element of risk seems to be relatively minor – for the time being.

Mainstream banks and authorities such as the IMF are showing definite interest in cryptocurrencies. Their interest could soon translate into direct involvement. What form that involvement might take remains unclear.

At present cryptocurrencies constitute a large and growing monetary system outside the traditional monetary system. In essence, this cyber system is extra-legal. Laws have simply not been written yet to provide official regulation. Some believe that such laws would be useless anyway.

Obviously, the whole area of cryptocurrencies will bear watching for some time to come. Who knows? They could well be our monetary future.

Possible income for all

"... if global output and the income to which it gives rise were equally divided, each individual in the world would have an income of about 760 euros per month."

*Thomas Piketty,
Capital in the Twenty-First Century, 2014.*



Robyn Peterson

The winds of change approach

The stress factor

Continuing work over the years has shown that stress can bring on or make us more susceptible to quite serious diseases, including heart conditions and cancer.

Because stress has deep and disturbing effects, it deserves serious and positive attention at work and in society in general.

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.

This newsletter is free in its e-version form.

**Contact Robyn Peterson at:
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Making sure they hear you at city hall

Sarah Shrigley

Most people have an opinion about how government works, but few have any idea about how to lobby government effectively.

Unless you think government is perfect, and doing its best for your benefit, it might be helpful to know how to encourage politicians to take your views into account. You can be sure the influential, and wealthy, have learned how to do this for their benefit.

I recently attended “Tenant’s School”, where we learned that essentially developers “owned” city hall. This might lead you to believe that if you aren’t wealthy, you have little, or no influence. But it’s votes that count in the end, not money,

Effective lobbying can work. Successful lobbying of your city councillor and the mayor will almost equal money, and the more people you have on your side, the more influence you will have.

I started my professional life as a broadcaster with exceptional access to politicians. They are human, but the higher they go, the less access they allow, and the less attention they pay to regular folk.

After leaving broadcasting, I became self-employed, and discovered how insignificant the views of most people are seen to be by those involved in the great scheme of politics.

I’ve worked on behalf of animal rights and was on the ground to see PETA become a political force. I helped start a political party in Ontario dedicated to animal welfare and was the CFO for another party in a downtown Toronto riding.

Local governments affect your life the most. City bylaws, and public transit have a direct impact on your daily life, much more so than international politics. (Unless you are in the import/export business.)

Now let’s look at lobbying possibilities.

First, emails are considered spam -

easy to send, and easy to ignore. Paper letters get little attention, even if they are written by hand in cursive - quaint, but they’re not going to be put under the nose of “the boss”.

A face to face with someone in the local constituency office has impact. You’ve taken the time and effort to show up in person, and you will not be ignored. Bringing a single info sheet with you will help ensure your concerns are seen by the right “eyes”. Timing your visit to be there when “the boss” is in – even better. Being prepared with the salient facts will convey a sense that you know what you are talking about.

Bringing a group of like-minded people to a constituency office helps, to a point, but it could backfire. It could come across to some in the office as being threatening.

A co-ordinated campaign of visits, seemingly unco-ordinated, with people having similar points of view over the period of a week or two would get your point across rather effectively.

The best way to tweak the attitude of your politician, is to join their election campaign by volunteering and working for them. Even if your candidate doesn’t win, your efforts may result in the winner acknowledging your efforts, especially if it’s a close race.

Volunteer, and make your views known. Becoming an internal part of a campaign will ensure your point of view is taken seriously.

The winner might be persuaded to adopt one or more of your candidate’s positions, if they think doing so will increase their vote count next time round. (Liberals have been poaching NDP ideas for decades).

Changing the minds of “the deciders” will see the changes you want turned into legislation.

Making your views and ideas more visible to those who make decisions is work, but worth it, if you want to change your world for the better.

Good luck.

‘Foreign’ investment?

“Foreign firms based in Canada borrow money from Canadian banks and then deduct the interest charges from their profits in Canada to reduce their taxes here. Then they invest the money abroad, often in tax havens. This both inflates ‘Canadian’ direct investment abroad and sharply reduces taxes payable in Canada.”

*Mel Hurtig,
The Truth About Canada, 2008*

Decent housing for everyone?

In September of 2015, as all the noise of a federal election took place, Senator Art Eggleton, a former mayor of Toronto, published an article in the Ottawa Citizen calling on all parties to pay more attention to the issue of affordable housing. He argued that housing was a basic necessity just as much as adequate nutrition.

In his article, Eggleton stated that *“it’s solvable if there is political will to do so”*. He called for a National Housing Strategy to deal with this issue, noting that at least four million people in the country were struggling to find affordable housing for themselves.

The 2017 budget allocated \$11.2-billion to support a national housing strategy. This sum was to be spent over 11 years.

This amount of money will make some difference. At the same time, many critics say it is not nearly enough. Spread over more than a decade, it will be painfully slow to deal with the affordable housing problem we now face.

Unfortunately, it seems that affordable housing is just not seen as a priority.



Roybyn Peterson

So who lives here?

The ISDS onslaught continues

We hear a lot about Canada negotiating different "free" trade agreements in the world. We also hear about a dangerous clause that is routinely and quietly discussed and included in such agreements, more or less as a matter of course. This is the ISDS clause.

The initialism "ISDS" stands for "investor-state dispute settlement". On its own this phrase seems innocuous. It's implications, however, are serious and directly threaten national sovereignty and democracy itself.

In the case of CETA (Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement), arbitration tribunals will be set up to rule on disputes involving complaints by corporations that government actions had hurt their business prospects, current or future. These tribunals will be made up of designated corporate appointees and possibly a few government representatives.

In effect, using ISDS tribunals, the corporate sector rules on whether government has infringed corporate "rights" in specific cases. Tribunal rulings include the assessing of dollar compensation to be paid to the complaining corporation. This panel process is outside the regular judicial system and its rulings are not subject to appeal.

The *Economist* in an article published on October 11 of 2014 highlighted the dangers of this type of clause. It noted that: "The highest award so far is some \$2.3 billion to Occidental, an oil company, against the government of Ecuador, over its (apparently lawful) termination of an oil-concession contract."

Appeal by the government to arbitration rulings are not generally possible. Awards of hundreds of millions of dollars, sometimes billions, for supposed infringements in different countries have already been made.

If a government in Canada, federal, provincial, or municipal were to pass legislation designed, say, to protect the environment or advance worker

rights, such legislation might be called into question through the ISDS process. A corporation might claim that such legislation would damage its prospects for future profits in a given activity. The corporation would not have to demonstrate that such damage had occurred, just that it was possible.

With ISDS in effect, corporations look over the shoulders of politicians to ensure they pass no legislation that might hurt profits. This creates a governance chill and works to ensure that only corporate-friendly laws are passed.

Over time, the concept of democratic government is slowly being eroded by panels of appointed people with virtual dictatorial power. Canada is gradually becoming a place wide open for corporate exploitation, and the role of government is being sharply reduced, all without recourse to the ballot box.

In many ways, agreeing to insert ISDS provisions in our international trade agreements is a fundamental betrayal of Canada. In an earlier age, if top politicians had shamelessly surrendered the country's sovereignty in this way, they might have been accused of treason.

Under the existing NAFTA, Canada has already paid out hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation ordered by ISDS tribunals. As more and more international corporations line up thanks to more and more 'free' trade deals, how many additional millions (or billions) will we have to pay?

When top politicians and others proudly announce 'free' trade deals, they are, in effect, promoting the further incursion into civil life of private interests. These interests too often are harmful to the public interest. Many environmental calamities of the past attest to this.

Free trade deals continue to be promoted as wondrous ways to create good jobs and to 'grow' the economy. These pro-corporate deals are pushed, no matter the consequences for ordinary people. Are Canadians content to continue letting this happen?

Use our articles?

Sometimes people want to know about using articles from Sayout in other publications.

The quick answer is: please feel free to do so.

The only thing we ask is that you attach an attribution. If the articles are unsigned, they're written by Robyn Peterson.

Thanks for your interest.

Our quest for justice

A crucial question for any justice system is: "Who is this system meant to serve and for what purposes?" In a democracy the justice system supposedly serves the people as a whole and is meant to pursue justice for the benefit of all.

If a justice system serves only the interests of the powerful and the wealthy, it has become dysfunctional.

When inequality is widespread, justice will be affected by the amounts of money different parties can access. So justice itself becomes unequal.

We must always work to support good and equal justice. It's fundamentally good citizenship.



Robyn Peterson

Hold it! I think I dropped my wallet!

ISDS claims against Canada

"As of January 2015, there had been 37 known ISDS claims against Canada under NAFTA, with settled awards to corporations totalling about C\$172 million ... and still faces more than C\$2.6 billion in pending claims."

Joyce Nelson
Beyond Banksters, 2016