

# SA YOUT

Fall 2014

*Ideas, Facts, and Opinions for Today*

## What About Those Taxpayers?

In the past twenty years or so, we've become accustomed to politicians, business leaders, and other prominent people talking about "taxpayers" where public discourse in the past talked about "citizens". Questions such as, "What will this cost the taxpayers?" spring readily to the lips. Why do we now talk about taxpayers when we mean citizens or the public?

A significant amount of rhetoric over the years has gone into the idea of de-emphasizing government while reinforcing the idea of free enterprise. This has fed into the notion that in a free society individuals should be left to pursue their own interests and business activities without interference by any level of government. Closely tied to this notion has been the idea that taxes drain money away from what would otherwise be good individual choices in the marketplace. Gradually, this pervasive rhetoric, heavily supported by the media, has underscored the idea that taxes are bad, all taxes. By contrast, individual choices are good and people should be left to pursue their own dreams by their own efforts.

*The low taxes lots of individual free-*

*dom narrative is beguiling. After all, everyone can do well on their own — right? Government is just a bunch of bureaucrats who sit around dreaming up restrictions on people who know what they want and how to get it. Let everyone get on with their own pursuits and the world will be a better place. Ah yes, a world of wide open individual freedom does seem attractive to many.*

When the term "taxpayer" comes into use, it carries with it a similar connotation to the word "captive". It mixes reluctance with compulsion. So the idea of taxpayers having to pay for something carries with it a certain stigma. It also carries with it the idea that only taxpayers must be considered when government does things.

In a democracy, government is supposed to be about doing what's right for the citizens — all citizens. Wouldn't it be interesting if public discourse got back to emphasizing citizens in the future? Then we might focus on benefits and not just costs in the public domain. What a concept!

## Gaza – A Necessary Agony?

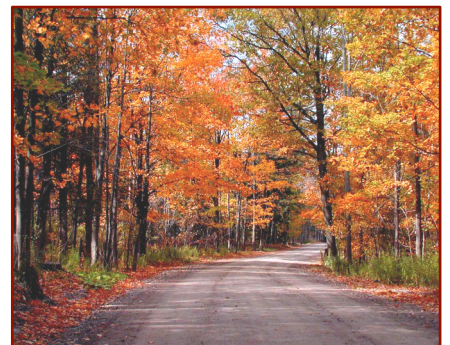
Who could not be moved by the sight of so many blasted homes and wounded and dead civilians, men, women and children in Gaza? It would truly be heartless not to be moved.

Once again we saw the mighty Israeli military (IDF) moving massively into part of Palestine to subdue determined fighters for the Palestinian cause.

Scattered throughout apartment complexes, schools, hospitals, and other civil structures, those fighters were hard to pinpoint and engage. The Israelis, as a result, resorted to heavy weapons to reduce entire neighbourhoods to rubble. "Collateral" damage and death on an enormous scale ensued.

Was all of this really necessary — by any standard?

Must we have recurrent bloody crises such as this? As Churchill said, "Talk, talk" is always better than "War, war". Where are the world powers in all of this? Which of them will take the initiative to settle things once and for all by peaceful means. Or is that no longer possible?



Fall shows us glory

## Stock market activity

The media breathlessly depicts the stock markets as places where people frantically trade back and forth with much shouting and drama.

The truth is that about 80% of today's trading is done automatically by computers using carefully programmed algorithms.

## Love and wealth

*"Societies in which people 'love thy neighbor as thyself' are categorically wealthier than those in which beggar-thy-neighbor policies predominate."*

*Rick Boettger  
The Deficit Lie, 1994*

## Living in a Ponzi World

Various commentators have said that we're now living in a Ponzi world. By this they mean that the global financial system has set up so many loans and "financial products" that we now have trillions of dollars of owed money soaring around the world. The sums involved dwarf the total productive output of the world many times over.

In some ways the global financial system now resembles a man performing a juggling act. Bundles of money gets thrown up in a dazzling dance of swirling obligations and payments. The whole thing is a wonder to behold. But one nasty slip and disaster becomes inevitable.

In the classic Ponzi scheme, more and more "investors" must always be brought in lower down the pyramid to feed dividends to those higher up. As long as new people can be brought in lower down in sufficient numbers, the scheme can continue. If they dwindle, though, the juggling falters.

Some economists and politicians repeatedly call for growth, ever more growth. Are they actually aiming at keeping the big Ponzi scheme going? Could that be?

### Good consumption?

*"It does not take a high level of consumption to enable everyone in a country to be fed, clothed, housed, educated and entertained to an excellent standard – unless, that is, an extraordinarily wasteful system dictates otherwise."*

Richard Douthwaite  
*The Growth Illusion, 1999*

## Action learning

Action learning combines learning and acting. Teams use this process to learn different things about a given issue or problem. They meet, share their learning, decide on actions to try, assess results, reflect on those results, and then develop further actions. In the end, the issue or problem they're working on will likely be resolved.

## Agnotology

The word "agnotology" is relatively new and it now describes a distinct area of study at different universities. Professor Robert N. Proctor of Stanford University is particularly associated with this field of study.

Agnotology focuses on the deliberate fomenting of ignorance or doubt in society. Agnotology applies, for instance, to much of the work of those who deny that the world's climate is warming as a result of human activities.

An important technique of agnotology is not to challenge evidence directly, but to sow seeds of doubt or confusion about the information concerning a given issue. Some of the information provided may be false or misleading. This deliberately creates controversy.

Agnotology intentionally spreads ignorance or clouds important issues. It occurred, for example, with the decades-long denial of harm from tobacco products.

Given the continuing dominance of neoliberal thinking in our society as we cope with ongoing economic problems, we might wonder about how much of what we see and hear from those who promote neoliberal concepts is actually agnotology. Quite possibly it's much more than we think.

More than ever alert citizens need to think deeply about what politicians and business leaders are saying. How much of the information fed to us with lots of light and sound is actually agnotology produced to further a particular purpose, a purpose we might not actually agree with?



May we have some action please?

## Printing in 3D

The cost of 3D printers is dropping steadily. People can already buy them as items of personal technology.

The use of these printers for "additive manufacturing" is expanding around the world. Various innovative individuals and companies are finding new uses for them on a continuing basis.

One area where they may prove very useful is in the production of parts for old pieces of equipment, including vehicles. Need some parts for your pre-1910 Stanley Steamer? A company may now be able to produce that part for you on a 3D printer.

Old documents containing technical specifications and drawings are likely to have new value.

Intriguingly, 3D printers may have a prominent place in our hospitals. Need a hip replacement? Well, the hospital may be able to print one up for you that is perfectly formed and matched for your body.

The possibilities are many. And, of course, profits will be made. Here we have the shaping of many things to come.

## 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

## Ain't the GDP wonderful?

When talking about the health of our economy, economists, politicians, members of the media, and others will routinely invoke the magic initialism: GDP – gross domestic product. This basic figure, concocted by government economists supposedly tells us how well our economy is doing. That, in turn, is meant to tell us how well our society is doing.

In 1995, in an article in the October issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, three authors (Cobb, Halstead and Rowe) outlined the meaning and key elements of the GDP, including its inadequacies as a good economic measure.

They defined GDP as: “a gross measure of market activity, of money changing hands. It makes no distinction whatsoever between desirable and undesirable, or costs and gain.” They went on to note that only issues of money changing hands are considered in making up the GDP. If, say, a group of townspeople get together to build a road with their own labour and equipment, their effort will count as nothing in GDP terms unless they happen to buy something such as aggregate or chainsaws. In the end, they will likely end up with a GDP number that is far less than the true value of the new road for the town.

A healthy forest just sits there. So it's worth nothing in GDP terms. If it burns, though, GDP comes into the picture because suddenly equipment is needed to deal with the fire and pay cheques must be arranged for the firefighters – all countable items.

The GDP can go up or down, but it's not measuring what most people consider to be wealth or well-being. It's measuring numbers that happen

to please the financial community.

A few years ago, the president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, appointed a commission to look into the possibility of coming up with a national measure other than the GDP. Joseph E. Stiglitz, the noted economist, chaired this commission. In the fall of 2009 they produced a 300-page report.

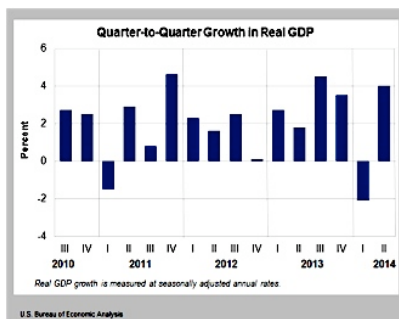
The commission didn't come up with an easy numerical measure, but they did note that metrics should be established for employment, material well-being, interpersonal connectedness, health, education, environment, and political engagement. These metrics, in their view, had much more meaning than the GDP as it now stands.

Today, five years later, we find our leading figures still talking about the Canadian GDP as though this really measures the socio-economic health of our country. It seems we're caught up in some sort of continuing thought trap we cannot escape.

The persistent insistence by politicians, economists, and the media on using the GDP as our central economic measure has many implications. It drives policies at high levels, and it directly affects the way various programmes are conceived and delivered.

If the GDP measure is as seriously flawed as so many top notch economists and social analysts believe, why are we still using it? Why is it still so central in the pronouncements delivered to us from on high?

The next time you hear someone talking about the GDP as though it describes the well-being or true wealth of our society, be sceptical, very sceptical.



## The ALEC conspiracy

The *American Legislative Exchange Council* is a privately-funded think tank that provides 'model bills' that different state or federal governments may adopt whole or in part. It also holds conferences of like-minded advocates and produces articles designed to support and shape specific causes, such as anti-union activities.

ALEC works on the conservative side of the political spectrum. It may frame bills that support the operations of fossil fuel firms or that provide watered down measures concerning greenhouse gas emissions.

The model bills that ALEC produces are well written and take into account prevailing legal provisions. Legislators may be impressed enough to introduce these bills into their own legislatures for debate and approval, sometimes without making any adjustments to what ALEC has written. They may also adjust the model bills to suit local needs or use them as significant reference documents for producing new bills.

ALEC is well funded and has gained a major position of influence in recent years. Given the close ties between Canada and the United States, there is every reason to believe that Canadian legislators make use of model bills produced by ALEC just as their American counterparts do.

While ALEC does not break the law, it does help to pull together conservative constituencies within a single framework of widespread influence and action. This process adds considerable power to the 'messaging' going out to the public.

Citizens should certainly know about ALEC and its activities. This can help them to shape their views concerning the various measures they see and hear different politicians espousing. They might then judge whether those measures truly meet local or national priorities or actually represent the bigger agenda of an outside group.

Does ALEC have our best interests in mind? Put another way: Who's interests are really being served?





**Roll out the wagon of bounty**

### **Bankers profit in secret**

*The secrecy surrounding derivatives trading is a key factor enabling banks to make such large profits.*

*A Secretive Banking Elite Ruels Training in Derivatives, Louise Story, The New York Times, December 11, 2010.*

### **Why is pot illegal?**

Marijuana was made illegal in Canada in 1923. Apparently, the background papers that argued for passage of the relevant bill are not to be found. So the reasons behind its passage are not entirely clear.



It took another fourteen years for the United States to follow suit during the Depression years.

When one considers that many people have been rounded up and jailed for marijuana use or distribution, it seems odd that the reasoning behind making it illegal in the first place is mysterious. Yet advocates for harsh penalties related to this drug argue forcibly that such penalties should be retained. What, exactly, makes them so ready to make criminals of ordinary and usually harmless citizens?

An obscure old law wreaks havoc on the lives of many thousands. What purpose does that actually serve?

It seems fair to say that legalizing marijuana makes sense in today's world. There seem to be more reasons in favour of its legalization now than were available ninety years ago to make it illegal in the first place.

## **Do you have a Luddite point of view?**

Has anyone ever called you a "Luddite"? Have you ever called someone a Luddite? If you have or they have, what was the intended meaning of the term?

Usually, people call someone a Luddite if they believe that person is deliberately resisting something new. There's a connotation attached to the term that says, in effect, you're a bit backward because you're not adjusting to a new way of doing things or a new piece of equipment. To be called a Luddite is to be scorned. If you're a Luddite, you're resisting progress!

Historically, the Luddite movement made its mark in northern England from 1811 to 1817. They took their name from a fictitious character who was often called King Ludd or just Ned Ludd. Weavers and other skilled artisans sought ways to challenge the increased industrialization of their work, with the consequent slashing of pay levels and loss of jobs.

Obtaining no response from government to their petitioning for fair treatment, the Luddites increasingly resorted to violence, including the destruction of those factory machines they perceived to be ruining their communities.

Things became so violent that the British army moved in with

thousands of troops, including cavalry and artillery to quell the Luddites and guard the factories. The death penalty came into effect to punish those who destroyed machines. Seventeen Luddites were hanged. Many others were transported to Australia.

In essence, the Luddites were protesting the arbitrary destruction of their existing way of life, including the healthy functioning of their communities. They did not oppose machinery or new ways of doing things as such. What they objected to was the destruction of their communities for the benefit of a few. There's something familiar about that.

Many of the grievances the Luddites sought to redress two hundred years ago are with us in the present day. Inequality, large-scale unemployment, social upheavals, and much more connect in spirit with the kinds of things the Luddites confronted.

If we seek to take care in introducing new inventions and innovations because we want to avoid unintended consequences, we behave like the Luddites of old. Perhaps that's not such a bad thing. It's even possible that we need more Luddite ways of thinking today, not less.

### **The Dead Sea Scrolls**

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947. They have been a focus of controversy in religious circles ever since. Their content could still profoundly reshape Christianity.

#### **A good job**

*"A good job is a job with a paycheck from an employer and steady work that averages 30+ hours per week."*

*Jim Clifton  
The Coming Jobs War, 2011*



### **Walk in the woods**

And take away some stress. Nature provides great therapy.