

Mouammar Kadhafi and the Harper Brand

The problem with writing an editorial for a quarterly magazine is that you can't really comment on current events. By the time you go to press, things will have changed and what you had to say will no longer be current, or worse, will have been proven by unfolding events to have been faulty analysis. So I am particularly grateful not to have to comment on events unfolding in North Africa and the Middle East. Frankly, I'm not at all sure what's going on or where things are headed. To what end and on behalf of whom are we participating in the bombing of Libya, at great expense to Canadian taxpayers? Is it, as the cover story would have it, to protect a Libyan population, legitimately protesting decades of abuse, from violence at the hands of an autocrat who exercises power by domination? By the time we go to press, perhaps we'll have a clearer idea.

And now the Harper Conservatives have been found in contempt of Parliament and has fallen to a non-confidence vote. By the time you read this, the election will no doubt be over. Whatever the outcome, it is probably useful to remind ourselves of the profound contempt Harper has for Canadian democracy and for the Canadian people. If the other parties have done their job in the campaign, by now you have heard a great deal about the shameful performance of Harper on the environment, social programs, culture, scientific research, women's issues, veterans' issues, on the

issue of accountability and transparency, etc. Indeed, if they have done their job, they have clearly exposed Harper for what he is, the most destructive and the least democratic PM Canada has ever had. I cringe at the thought that as you read this, and in spite of his most shameful record, he may

be Prime Minister again. Whatever the outcome, life goes on in Canada and the world and it might be useful for us to consider what the Harper "brand" means.

As more enlightened observers than I have noted, in the organization of human affairs, disaster threatens from two sides, order and chaos. Forms of

government that favour the exercise of power through structured consent serve to avoid both these threats. Democracy is one such form of government and the British parliamentary system, over several centuries, has evolved many clever ways of achieving structured consent. We who live under Westminster parliamentary systems are heirs to what is arguably the most brilliant form of democratic government ever devised by man. It is brilliant, for example, in the way it deals with executive power. In Canada, executive power is held by the Governor General. This power is largely symbolic but he/she does have ultimate executive authority nonetheless. While it is true that the Prime Minister does exercise some executive functions, it is as also true and most significant that the Prime Minister is "first among equals." Equal, that is,

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to other cabinet ministers and to all other members of parliament, our legislators, all of whom are hired by the people of Canada and paid by us to see to the country's administration. It's worth repeating: they are in parliament to serve the people who elected them, who pay them and whom they represent. When the Canadian government is working properly, it is a system that is as complex as the Canadian population is diverse and that operates on negotiated compromises, hopefully for the greater good.

Now, what happens when an autocrat ends up in the position of Prime Minister, an autocrat who wants to impose his order on the deliberately ungainly complexity of Westminster style parliamentary democracy? In a word, disaster ensues: Parliament twice prorogued when things were not going his way; (the otherwise capable and admirable, Michaëlle Jean, has a lot to answer for here. She could have and should have refused to prorogue in the first instance and favoured the establishment of a coalition that represented the majority of electors); the partisan manipulation of parliamentary committees; the obsessively tight control of spin and the attempted control

of the media; the ignoring of resolutions passed by majority votes in Parliament, resolutions representing the will of the majority of Canadians; the undermining and manipulating of oversight

commissions and watchdog agencies. The list of this Prime Minister's malfeasances goes on and on. Impelled by an obsessive need to exercise control in order to drive forward a right wing agenda, he has used means so extreme, illegitimate and insulting they should shock all Canadians who care at all about Canada and about our democracy. For a very thorough and fully documented account, see Murray Dob-

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bin's *Stephen Harper's Assault on Democracy* available at: <http://www.canadians.org/democracy/>. You may also want to consider the document *Silencing Dissent: The Conservative Record* on the CCPA site: <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/silencing-dissent-conservative-record>.

The capitalist globalisation agenda, which places the imperatives of continuous-growth and corporate profits above all other considerations, is not promoted or defended by Canadian Conservatives alone. Nor is Harper alone in having

come to the realisation that democracy is the enemy of global capitalist imperialism. That realisation and its outcomes are the fruit of a relatively long and complex historical evolution with ramifications in all areas of the world. Finally coming home to roost, the imperative of global capitalism has resulted, ultimately, in the suspension of democracy in America itself. Its eventual restoration, which would require good will and considerable effort from all sides, is in no way assured. Consider only that president Obama, even when he had majorities in both houses, never even brought up the possibility of repealing the Patriot Act. Those interested in the history of the demise of American democracy may want to read, among many books

on the topic, Peter Dale Scott's *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire and the Future of America* and Lew Dubose and Jake Bernstein's *Vice: Dick Cheney and the Hijacking of the American Presidency*.

Returning to our situation, what are some of the ways these currents play out on the Canadian stage? As a dramatic illustration, let's consider the G-20 summit in Toronto last June. The G-20, which, admittedly, was conceived by a Liberal Finance Minister and later Prime Minister, (also long-time CEO of Canada Steamship Lines and prominent member of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives), Paul Martin, is made up of the Finance Ministers and Central Bank governors of the twenty richest countries in the world, EU representation and the managing director and the chairman of the International Monetary Fund and the president of the World Bank as well as a few other such notables of world finance. At the summits, heads of government are usually also present. The purpose of the G-20 is to manage the global economy.

Consider who was present in Toronto last June, in addition to the good citizens. On the one hand we have the small group of mostly white men of the G-20, the majority of whom are unelected functionar-

ies and businessmen, the self-appointed managers of the global economy. On the other side are huge numbers of citizens' groups representing a broad range of causes and concerns: labour groups, anti-poverty groups, groups opposed to capitalist imperialism, environmental groups, women's groups, GLBT groups, anti-war groups, anti-racism groups, and numerous other groups defending various aspects of social justice and human rights. Between them and the G-20 representatives are a security wall and an army of police that cost Canadian taxpayers one billion dollars for the three days of the summit.

Ask yourself, which of these groups, the G-20 or the protesters, better represents your interests? Then ask yourself, if these men of the G-20 are not stupid or unconscious, then what are they? It takes a billion dollars of security

to protect them from groups of citizens legitimately demonstrating for various aspects of social justice, human rights and the respect of Earth! Clearly, they must see how massive is the opposition of ordinary citizens to their vision of global, economic management. Clearly, they must understand how profound and widespread is the hatred for what they represent.

How do they deal with it? This brings us back to their host in Toronto, Stephen Harper. His response was, and this is the kindest word I can manage, maniacal. His crazed obsession with order was allowed to run amuck. With the forced collusion of the administration of the City of Toronto and the Government of Ontario, he imposed virtual martial law and deployed an immense force of heavily armed policemen to protect the very small, immured group of "world leaders". History has a name for "leaders" who impose their will from behind fortifications and ensure order through the deployment of massive military might, leaders who suppress legitimate dissidence with guns and bombs. I give you their host, their cheerleader, their devotee, Stephen Harper. The 2010 summit of the G-20 is a most apt representation of the Harper brand.

—Yves Saint-Pierre

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Letters

First, congratulations on a significant editorial. Since genetically modified organisms and Agent Orange, two inventions by Monsanto scientists, I have wondered if scientists are able to be concerned about humanity. Such paid profiteers are not able to determine what are human needs when people are dying early in Canada after spraying Agent Orange. Recent events in Japan raise the effectiveness of nuclear reactors, another scientific invention.

As you allude, I think we need both religious and scientific ways of knowing if we are to get a fuller picture of human progress. Likely each of us harbours both types of belief. We use materials like food when appropriate and we appreciate a beautiful sunset, great music and art on other occasions.

As I have noted in previous letters, atheists appear equally certain of things as do theists. The certainty of both belief systems, like both but different genders or the left and right hemispheres of the brain contribute to a holistic view of the world. To get committed to one belief system or one personality type is merely to seek certainty where none appears to exist.

Human created institutions such as church and state can and ought to be separated. But human belief systems and human knowledge cannot be so confined.

—**Barry Hammond**
Winnipeg

Thank you for your letter and for your continued support. If I may clarify one point: while I suggest that much can be learned about the human experience from the study of the arts, among them literature, which includes mythology, nowhere do I support religious belief.

—**Yves Saint-Pierre**

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I read your editorial in the Winter Issue of the magazine and was in agreement with much of what you had to say. In particular I support your call that the voices of indigenous peoples need to be heard as we search for solutions to inform our science. You are in good company here with the likes of Wade Davis and Ronald Wright in their Massey Lectures. Yes, there is much to be learned from cultures and traditions, beliefs and practices other than those of the post colonial West whether sought out in their original settings or brought to our shores to enrich our multicultural community.

However, you lost me at the tail end of your article when, in support of your editorial's perspective, you spoke of what might be acceptable or not acceptable as a standard of dress in the workplace. The figurative woman, who in your mind is likely to be sent home to dig some version of the pin-striped suit out of her closet to replace her original choice of attire, you imply is being discriminated against given

the possibility of another woman in the same workplace being allowed to remain on the job in her chosen attire, a hijab. Your analogy is bewildering to say the least. No, I don't see where you are going at this point.

Am I to understand that you would have the Hassid cut off his locks, the Sikh unwrap his headpiece, the traditional nun or Franciscan friar shed their habits and the Muslim woman discard her *hijab* before they enter your defined civic space. Does Dublin city have to relegate Fr. Mathew's statue to the trash heap because it is wearing a roman collar in the civic space that is O'Connell St. and is every minaret to be toppled to clear the way for your secular civic space in Istanbul?

The many outward symbols of people's beliefs, tastes and traditions in all their forms are expressions of freedom of choice, something we highly value as humanists. Surely you do not mean to advocate that the man brandishing his cross as he pontificates at speakers' corner in Hyde Park be arrested? Yours would be a hard line to draw in law. Removing the monument to the Ten Commandments from one of Winnipeg's parks would be justifiable and doable, but where do you want to draw the line when the people walking or driving through the same park and civic space are wearing T-shirts or sporting bumper stickers proclaiming the same ten religious principles?

Yes, Yves, continue to dream

long and well but plan for the attainable.

–**Gerry Moore**
Winnipeg, MB

Dear Mr. Moore.

Thank you for your letter and your support; however, you seem to misconstrue my words on a few points. The right of religious expression in private **and in public** is guaranteed under our Charter. However, the Charter is silent with respect to **civic space**, space paid for by all taxpayers used for the provision of services to all citizens. My position is that civic space must be free of all religious symbols and articulations if all citizens are to enjoy the religious freedom and respect granted under the charter.

In the example to which you allude, I evoke the hypothetical case of a woman seeking referral for spousal abuse from a government agency who is met by a public employee wearing a *hijab*, which the victim of abuse interprets as submission to patriarchal authority. This is no more appropriate than her being met by a public employee whose attire suggests submission to domineering male sexual fantasies.

In all public spaces, parks, streets, etc. and in all private spaces, the right of all citizens to profess and display their adherence to a religion is guaranteed under the charter. I don't contest it in the least. Nor do I propose the destruction or removal of religious architecture or decoration from public spaces. On the contrary. I enjoy beautiful art and architecture and willingly concede the beauty of religious

architecture and religious art. They help chronicle our histories. And I believe they greatly enrich our cities and our culture.

Thank you for your continued interest.

–**Yves Saint-Pierre**

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Congratulations on your winter 2010-11 issue of *Humanist Perspectives*, with its range of fine articles. I was particularly interested and pleased to see the amount of attention to making explicit the dynamics of money and power at work in present-day society, and how this is responsible for growing injustice and intensified conflict, but at a deeper level for harming nature, of which we humans are part and parcel, in ways that will be, and already are in many respects, catastrophic for ourselves and other life forms.

Shadia Drury does excellently in drawing attention to the type of strategies those in control of the allocation of large amounts of capital (including takings from taxpayers) – and their right wing pundits – employ to deceive the “working class” into believing the myths of an ideology directly contrary to its own best interests, while adding increasing numbers of the middle class to its ranks. I was glad to see Shadia Drury rightly identify the present Harper regime in Canada with the strategies she describes. Indeed, as one who came to Canada as an immigrant almost half a century ago, I have yet to see another Canadian government come close to being a better illustration than the

present minority one of, among much else, demeaning “liberal elites,” conflating fake populism with democracy, shoring up the myth that society as a whole benefits when the rich get richer, cultivating the illusion of meritocracy (to justify inequality), and undermining the separation of church and state.

–**David Blackwell**
Bedford, NS

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Your editorial was wonderful. I was at the same conference in L.A. and felt exactly the same way. I was so glad you mentioned the Monsanto scientists... this dualism of science as the source of truth and goodness and religion as the only source of evil in the world is Manichean.

Also the canonization... these silly politicians going to Rome and sucking up to the Pope. How outrageous. I heard of the canonization, but I did not know that our politicians went to Rome at taxpayer expense ! How outrageous! You put it very well when you said it was a slap in the face for the whole Quiet Revolution.

I have been writing about the Taylor-Bouchard accommodation of religious minorities and find it very disturbing. English Canada is dead to these concerns; Taylor is the new god of liberalism for English Canada. But Quebec understands these issues so well because of its experience of the stranglehold that the Catholic Church had on the province.

I hope we have a chance to work together again.

–**Shadia Drury**