Liberty, Equality and Dignity: Matters of Life and Death

This issue of Humanist Perspectives offers the reader not one but three feature articles: “Death without Hysteria” by J. Anthony Cassils, David Rand’s “The Charter, the Turban and the Monarchy” and the “letter to Edward Snowden” by Rebecca Solnit, “Prometheus Among the Cannibals.” The implications of all three of these issues have a profound bearing on the quality of our living and dying.

The connection is most obvious in Cassils’ measured and thoughtful examination of the shameful state of Canadian law with respect to our right to die with dignity. A law that turns a person into a criminal because he or she is compassionate enough to assist another person to die, when that individual asked for such assistance, is nothing less than barbaric.

Given the indomitable will to live in all creatures, the decision to depart from this world is never taken lightly. Usually it comes with advanced and incurable disease, excruciating pain and/or a state of mental or physical incapacity that deprives the individual of the joy of living as she becomes utterly dependent on others to see her through each wretched day. To deny such a person the right to assisted suicide is irreconcilable with the most fundamental principles of democracy. Worse still, it is evidence of so profound a lack of compassion as to smack of sadism.

We are not talking here of teenagers who want to quit this world in a fit of depression or Weltschmerz, or those who are bullied into self-destruction by natural-born brutes. For them, psychologists and social workers should be at hand to help them negotiate the bridge across the inevitable disillusionment that is part of reaching maturity.

Nor are we talking about mercy killing, i.e. taking the life of someone who has not specifically asked to end his or her life. Even when this is done to spare the person endless suffering, it is euthanasia and must remain a criminal offence, except in extreme cases that can only be decided jointly by next-of-kin, attending physicians and the courts.

What we are talking about is the right, as Cassils puts it so succinctly, of every person of adult age and of sound mind... to die at a time of his or her choosing, and [to have] appropriate drugs... readily available to ensure a quick, painless and peaceful death. Polls suggest that this is what the majority of Canadians want, and that is what government in a democracy is therefore bound to enact. It is a measure of Stephen Harper’s autocratic rule that he refuses even to debate the issue in the House.

I have watched a woman dear to me suffer the humiliating agonies of the final stages of a crippling case of rheumatoid arthritis in a Vancouver hospital. Despite repeated pleas that she be allowed to die, and despite the support of her decision by the other family members, everything was done by the doctors to prolong her suffering. Eventually, her only way out was to starve herself to death. Her grim and undignified dying is upon the conscience of those who denied her, and hundreds of thousands like her, a dignified exit from this world. Shame on them!

The argument that legalizing assisted suicide would threaten the lives of vulnerable old people is, as Cassils shows, absolutely specious.
It is designed to conceal the insatiable greed of the old-age industry determined to collect enormous fees for accommodation in palliative-care homes and medical services for as long as they can. And it serves as a fig leaf to hide the bigotry of the pious who insist that others must live by the naive beliefs they hold to be dogma. And that brings us to the proposed Quebec Charter.

David Rand rightly pillories the hysterical outcry that greeted the intention of the Quebec government to introduce a Charter of Quebec Values. As a Quebecker himself, he is particularly sensitive to the anti-francophone-Quebec streak in anglophone Canada, and he attributes some of the clamour over the Charter to this latent cultural “racism.”

What concerns us here is the vehement and mostly irrational protest of the religious segment of the population who sees in the Charter an attack on freedom of religion. As Rand shows, it is nothing of the sort. Quite the contrary, insisting on the separation of church and state by prohibiting the display of ostentatious religious symbols and apparel by government officials in dealing with the public, the Charter actually enacts and confirms the liberty of and from religion for all. It puts, in Rand’s words, a very modest constraint on freedom of expression, and thereby protects and guarantees freedom of conscience for everyone.

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lic school system is estimated to be around $500,000,000 – money desperately needed to improve conditions in our schools and classrooms.

Even worse than the financial waste is the negative effect of a teaching practice and an educational program designed to serve a particular religious faith. Sheila Eskenazi, in her essay “Educating for a Secular Humanist Canada,” clearly sees the need for common education to bring our children together in one place to share learning and to experience each other unmediated by cultural, language or religious prejudices.

Separating children by religion, race or ethnicity creates divisions deep in the psyche, which will come to haunt a country that prides itself on its diversity.

Religion has no place in a public school program and must be left to the home and extra-curricular instruction. It is a form of indoctrination diametrically opposed to the basic objectives of education: the development of relentlessly curious, free minds equipped to deal constructively with the world’s challenges. In this matter, as on the issue of separating church and state, Quebec has given leadership to the country when it abolished the Catholic school system in 1998.

As for Ontario, since only about a third of its population is Catholic, it is safe to say that the majority of Ontarians are opposed to privileging the Catholic faith by a separate public school system, especially as not all Catholics support it either. Yet, although the Ontario Ministry of Education is currently engaged in “Building the Next Phase of Ontario’s Education Strategy,” the question of the separate Catholic school system is not even on the agenda. As with the majority demand for legalizing assisted suicide, the government ignores the electorate – except by word of mouth at election time.

Politicians are generally interested only in bolstering their power base, and most of them are prepared to do so by hook or by crook, and that means, primarily, by serving the interests of the corporations who finance their re-election. Public welfare be damned! The political process has become a mockery of democracy – which is why a growing majority of the electorate no longer bothers to vote. Decisions and deals are made behind closed doors in the Prime Minister’s office or by the party caucus and presented to Parliament for a brief debate and quick rubber-stamping by the obsequious majority in the House. It takes a breach of confidentiality by an insider for the public to learn the truth about what governments are really doing, as distinct from what they are saying or not saying.

That is why we must celebrate the new public figure – the whistleblower. In a world in which corruption has overtaken the body politic and governments spin a web of lies to conceal their true machinations, it becomes a moral imperative to expose their fraudulent dealings, however you come by the information. The truth must be told. Our governments serve to make the few rich richer and to control and manipulate the many poor.

Rebecca Solnit, in her letter to Edward Snowden, addresses the far-reaching implications of the role of today’s whistleblower. She explains that Snowden is a hero because he acted in full knowledge of the heavy personal price he would pay for serving the noble principles on which his country is built and the highest values it embodies. Your gift gives us hope, she tells him, and your courage, an example. Our loyalty should be to our ideals, because they are a threat to the secret system you’ve exposed, because we have to choose between the two.

The obscene and criminal abuse of power that Snowden has exposed constitutes an intrusion into our private lives that makes of all of us a public spectacle. It destroys our sphere of intimacy in which our humanity can flourish and opens us to manipulation by the unconscionable rich and powerful. It diminishes our lives as it marches us into Huxley’s “brave new world.”

Since 9/11 the USA has been barreling down that road on the pretext that national security justifies draconian government. It has broken the trust with world leaders by spying shamelessly even on those who are their allies. Snowden will have no part of it. He acted because, as he said, “I don’t want to live in a world where everything that I say, everything I do, everyone I talk to, every expression of creativity or love or friendship is recorded.”

The surveillance state is a fascist state. The outcry over the massive, secret recording, by the NSA, of phone conversations and digital communications of foreign leaders and ordinary citizens around the world suggests that there are
enough people aware of the disastrous consequences of such abuse of power. This gives us hope that these fascist tactics can be stopped and a measure of democracy restored.

It is significant that so far there has been no outcry in Canada over the US surveillance scandal, though there can be no doubt that our leaders and our ordinary citizens are subject to the same ruthless spying. We do know that our own government spies on its citizens. We also know that our government all too often operates behind a screen of secrecy. The recent trip by Stephen Harper to Europe to negotiate a trade deal is a case in point. The deal was brokered without the participation of Parliament or the public, and Harper’s report on it in the House consisted of the usual banal generalizations and the tiresome cant about job creation. What we can be sure of is that the deal will make the rich richer. Our PM doesn’t jet about the world with his corporate cronies for nothing. He has economic growth on his mind, not the devastation of our environment or the plight of our poor.

Yes, to some extent, we live in a more enlightened and a more democratic country than our neighbours to the south, but that may be solely a function of the fact that we always lag behind developments in the USA by a couple of years. Our government shares the same delusion that the free market creates a just and free society when, in fact, it has created runaway poverty, widespread corruption and autocratic government. The brutal use of police forces against peaceful demonstrators (as at the G-20 summit in Toronto in 2010) suggests that the rich are determined to perpetuate their privileges at all costs.

As humanists, we are committed to a world in which people everywhere can live in liberty, as equals, and with dignity. This has been the human struggle for millennia. It calls on us to engage in the political process and demand from our government leaders openness, accountability and the truth at all times. Until we succeed in creating a truly democratic society, we depend on whistleblowers to expose government mendacity and corruption. Edward Snowden has done us all a great service. We can only hope his fellow Americans will recognize that before it is too late.

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