

Dissent: Canada's Latest Endangered Species?

By Radical Randy

We find ourselves saddled with a dysfunctional and unsustainable economic system, with the downhill slide of the global economy and environment, and increasing corporate rule, inequality, and war. Many on the Canadian Left envision a more peaceful, equitable, fairer society with a truly sustainable environment. As the World Social Forum slogan goes, "Another world is possible." The fundamental question facing progressives is how we can bridge the gap to get from *here* to *there*. Rather than opposing the current mess, the financial and political ruling class are absolutely dependent upon it to maintain their power and wealth. They are hardly likely to make anything more than cosmetic PR changes even if we ask nicely. As abolitionist Frederick Douglass observed "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." Thus the subjects of this article, dissent and the defiance of power, are absolutely essential to fundamentally alter the existing order. It is therefore of grave concern that the various forms of dissent have come under escalating attack, particularly as capitalism and the American Empire become increasingly untenable.

Getting the message out

For any analysis of a problem to occur and solutions to be proposed, it is necessary to collect and disseminate information and data. It's hard for people to dissent when they don't know there's anything to dissent from. This was made clear this spring when Alberta doctors began coming forward with reports of intimidation and threats of retribution from health care officials to prevent them from speaking out on declining quality of patient care due to Medicare cuts.

The environment, especially in Alberta, is apparently another topic best left unexamined. It took the independent research of the University of Alberta's world-renowned water expert Dr David Schindler to force the federal government to admit there was insufficient monitoring of toxic and carcinogenic heavy metals polluting the Athabasca River from tar sands extraction. The size of a huge 2011 oil pipeline spill on Lubicon land, the second largest in Alberta history, was drastically downplayed by Alberta's Energy Resources Conservation Board until the day after the federal election, even though it possessed more accurate information days before.

The vast changes to our economy imposed by neoliberal market supremacy have left many workers behind and resulted in tremendous social and environmental damage. However, to move past a purely anecdotal unease requires hard numbers. That's why the Harper government's 2010 cancelling of the mandatory long-form census raises concern. The independent, unbiased census was critical to academics and other researchers to produce reports on Canadians' socioeconomic condition and to assess the impact of government policies. Harper has obstructed Canada's Access-to Information system and also attempted to mute dissent on unnecessary prison construction and his controversial F-35 fighter jet purchases by obfuscating their true cost. "Free trade" treaties are

negotiated by the federal government in secret behind closed doors. Perhaps nothing was as blatant as the attempt to obstruct revelations concerning Afghan detainee torture after hand-over by the Canadian military. Rather than release relevant documents to a Parliamentary committee Prime Minister Harper suspended inquiries by proroguing Parliament in 2009.

The furor over Harper's high-handed subversion of democracy inspired University of Alberta graduate student Christopher White to launch the Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament Facebook group, with resulting protests held around Canada on January 23, 2010. The Internet has been a vital instrument in getting information out and for organizing resistance, from 1999's WTO "Battle in Seattle" to 2011's "Arab Spring." As a result, it is unsurprising that Internet privacy is under threat. The Canadian government's "Lawful Access" bill would give police the right to intercept online communications and get personal information about subscribers from Internet service providers without first obtaining a search warrant.

Stay home, stay quiet, stay safe

Speaking of protests, Toronto's G20 Summit featured the largest mass arrests in Canadian history. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association report on the June 2010 G20 police crackdown, *A Breach of the Peace*, summarizes the violent dispersal of peaceful protesters and dehumanizing treatment of many detainees. Over 1100 arrests were made, with arbitrary searches across the city. The overwhelming majority of those detained were released uncharged, indicating that the arrests were targeted at disrupting peaceful demonstrations rather than in response to real criminal acts.

Strangely, police ignored nearby vandalism, instead choosing to concentrate on beating and arresting peaceful protestors, seemingly as easily distracted from real infractions as the ref in a tag-team pro wrestling match, with as much credibility. As journalist Naomi Klein reported on the June 28, 2010 *Democracy Now* newscast this "cop strike", allowing corporate property damage and burning cruisers to go unchallenged, gave the Toronto police a self-fulfilling vindication for the much criticized lavish spending on their windfall overtime pay and water and sound cannons.

It also allowed them, in concert with a cooperative media, to terrify citizens with images of the dreaded anarchist black hoodie brigade laying siege to Toronto, demonizing all protestors to justify the subsequent brutality and mass arrests and intimidating potential future protestors.

At the Montebello, Quebec 2007 Security and Prosperity Summit, three masked "demonstrators" were exposed as agent provocateurs from the Quebec police, a charge the Harper government initially denied until the Quebec police were forced to admit to it. It was later revealed that groups planning the Toronto protests had been infiltrated by a dozen police agents from the RCMP and Ontario police forces, raising issues of free assembly as well as the question of how much of the vandalism at these corporate-driven summits is "genuine."

"During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act"

George Orwell was only too prophetic. The capitalists who own and operate corporate media and those financing it with their advertising dollars tend to not be big fans of blatantly honest anti-capitalist or anti-corporate critiques. While often allowing socially liberal views and discussion of minor reforms, mass media will mangle, distort, or ridicule criticisms or proposals directly threatening to the system itself, when not ignoring them altogether.

As after every summit crackdown, there are the usual inquiries into police excesses. This results in issuing recommendations and guidelines for police at future protests to ignore. Naturally, corporate media portrays any misconduct on their part as the result of the proverbial "few bad apples" or the fog of battle, not official government or police policy.

The naked emperors parading through the G20 required a suspension of disbelief in order to get on with their mission of making the world safe once again for global bankers. To do this, they needed to convince the broader public that there could be no room for serious objections to their motives or policies, a bit difficult with thousands of ordinary citizens demonstrating in the streets. The state security apparatus needed to instruct the public on their proper role – and that doesn't involve giving advice to the government.

A standard response to protest is "if you don't like the way things are why don't you work within the system to change the laws and policies?" — a suggestion a little easier to take seriously if the plutocrats and corporations benefiting from the status quo weren't running the show.

Canadian civil rights: best exercised theoretically

The kinds of civil rights violations that happened in Toronto are often repeated in less spectacular, but potentially more insidious, ways. Anti-war and other protest marches in Edmonton have come under increasing pressure for police escorts with the protestors expected to cover the additional policing costs. Oddly, the organizers of George W. Bush's 2009 Edmonton speaking engagement weren't required to pay the extra RCMP policing expenses his visit as a private individual occasioned. Meanwhile, British MP George Galloway was banned from entering Canada for a speaking tour by Minister of Immigration and Citizenship Jason Kenney, a ban overturned by a Canadian federal court which found it to be politically motivated. Vancouver's contribution to Canadian dissent and free speech involved passing a bylaw making it illegal to distribute material or put up signs critical of the 2010 Winter Olympics. Additionally, Alberta's Mike Hudema, Climate and Energy Campaigner for Greenpeace Canada, reports that environmental activists engaging in banner drops, blockades, sit-ins, etc. face an increasing threat of criminal arrest for mischief and breaking and entering, with potential imprisonment rather than just a fine for simple trespass.

It is not only government that has been busy stifling dissent. Frivolous corporate-launched Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), with which big business targets activists or writers, are becoming more common. Although meritless SLAPPs have little chance of winning in court, the cost of fighting a phalanx of corporate lawyers can intimidate environmentalists and others into silence, with a chilling effect on dissent – exactly as intended.

Twilight, the most dangerous time

The suppression of dissent has been a signature of Harper's government and this may be expected to accelerate with his majority and a compliant media. As Lawrence Martin details in *Harperland*, the control and censorship begins with his own cabinet ministers and party. The Harper government has also used funding cuts as weapons against groups it has ideological disagreements with such as Status of Women Canada and the Kairos international development group. The "Beyond the Border Working Group" initiative between Harper and President Obama, integrating Canada with U.S. perimeter security, threatens to bring even more intrusive American-style surveillance and privacy violations to Canada, making it even easier to smother opposition in the name of the never ending "War on Terror." Harper also vows to bring back two expired clauses from the Antiterrorism Act: one allowing police to arrest suspects without warrant and hold them for three days without charges, and another clause allowing judges to compel secret testimony from witnesses.

The cracks in the global capitalist system and the American Empire that sustains it are rapidly becoming chasms. In the past, the plutocrats have been able to keep most workers reasonably docile, providing enough cheap spectacles and trinkets to distract the narcotized public. Author Chris Hedges warns in his Truthdig blog *2011: A Brave New Dystopia* that the ability of the failing Empire to bribe its citizens into submission, emulating Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, is collapsing. He suggests our ruling class will come more and more to depend on surveillance and direct repression, resembling the overt totalitarianism of Orwell's *1984*. No more bread and circuses, time for the powers that be to pull on the jackboots and get down to business. If Hedges is right the repression of dissent and violations of civil rights we have come to see as the norm thus far in Canada and the rest of the world are only the appetizers of the banquet the ruling elites are preparing for us.