

Who's a hero here?

As I write these lines, Montreal's hockey team has thankfully just been eliminated from the playoffs. I found myself inordinately angry the whole time they were still in contention. Everywhere one looked, there was the team's logo. The near hysterical public expressions of adulation and of hope for the team was frightening. What is the meaning of these displaced emotions? Why do so many feel the need to follow and to venerate a sports team? What does it reveal about our displaced sense of values, of community, of commitment and engagement? What does it mean about the power of commercially driven media coverage of celebrities and public amusers? The implications are not benign. Easy, lazy diversion and distraction are fostered for profit certainly but I fear they are embraced as a substitute for critical thinking and for engagement. **To see so many people at one time lifted to an hysterical frenzy of agitation for something so trivial, I find that worrisome and it makes me angry.** Could Maude Barlow giving an informed and challenging presentation on the Basic Human Right to Water, for example, draw the same sized crowd as goes out for a playoff game or achieve anywhere near the level of media coverage. Of course not. Yet the future of water is of vital importance to the future of life on our planet. Hockey gets the crowds; Maude Barlow, working tirelessly, struggles to be heard. Our public amusers are celebrated; our real heroes go begging.

Here's another consideration that makes me really angry. It costs a working class dad

the best part of a week's salary to bring his kids to a game where they watch coddled jocks do star turns, many of whom earn more in a season than he'll earn in a lifetime. These are men who are good at playing a boy's game! That's the crux of it. I'm angry because it strikes me as exemplifying so much of what has changed for the worse within my lifetime, how twisted our values have become.

The American title of the 2007 bestseller by Christopher Hitchens is "God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything." What I suggest here and what I have suggested in previous editorials is that **the more relevant consideration, where humanists are concerned, may be how money poisons everything.** The shared and equal value of all and of each human being, the fundamental principle on which the constitutions, charters and institutions of liberal democracies are meant to stand, has been devastated by the power of capital in recent years. In addition to politics and social policies and programs at all levels, every other area of human activity has been affected, including the perversion of science and technology to serve primarily the cause of immediate profit and the commodification of education, now largely transmogrified into training which is the contrary of a humanist education. Training fits the student into society; education makes the student fit to question and evaluate the values and practices of his or her society.

But wait. I seem to have fallen into a rant groove and I don't want to do that. Excuse me while I back out.



Photo by Yve Saint-Pierre

New start, Cochabamba:

Bien Vivir

In April, I had the good fortune of attending the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. The conference took place in Tiquipaya, a few kilometers outside the Bolivian city of Cochabamba. This was my first time in South America and I found it beautiful. Cochabamba is in the foothills of the Andes, surrounded by high, lush green hills. The flight there from La Paz is over the Andes and the views are breathtaking. The conference itself was an inspiration, although it was something of a rollercoaster ride. **The caring, the enthusiasm, the resourcefulness and the commitment of the people involved were obvious and contagious. But, like any reflection on climate change and the environ-**

ment these days, at times it was rather discouraging. Two things that struck me from the start I found immensely encouraging. This was definitely a "people's" conference. Representatives from all over the world and from diverse areas, government officials, environmental and climatological scientists, NGO representatives and militant environmentalists stood side by side. And indigenous peoples were front and centre. The Plurinational State of Bolivia has a majority indigenous population and, of course, Evo Morales Ayma, our host for the event, is himself Ayamara and the colourful Ayamara flag was everywhere in evidence at the opening ceremonies and throughout the event.

The conference included seventeen working groups, each with a specific focus. The conclusions of all of them have been integrated into the document we publish here. In addition there were panel discussions on issues such as The Structural Causes of Climate Change, Climate

Justice, The ABC of Climate Change Negotiations and several others.

A UN Charter of the Rights of Mother Earth, an International Court of Environmental Justice, and a clear articulation of the nature of Climate Debt are three of the most dramatic points the Bolivian delegation, and the movement that has grown out of the conference, will be bringing to Cancún, Mexico. That is the site of the next meeting of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the end of this year. Equally important are the issues of water, food and agricultural sovereignty, sovereignty in the management of forests and, indeed, of all natural resources. It behooves all of us to follow the process of moving these issues towards Cancún and to participate where we can. Useful links in that regard are provided at the end of this piece.

The day after my return from Bolivia, I found myself in an underground mall in the area of Peel street, in Montreal. Faced with the overwhelming opulence of what was on offer, I literally felt sickened. The fact is that having gone to this conference in South America, I will never get all the way back. I will no longer be able to pretend I don't know that our extravagant consumption is at the expense of the resources of the majority world. In that mall, I was reminded one of the most obscenely arrogant pronouncements I have ever heard: "The American way of life is not negotiable," first proclaimed by George H.W. Bush, at the Earth Summit in 1992, and repeated by both Bush Jr. and Dick Cheney. Well guess what: it is negotiable and the negotiations have started. On the other side of the table, so to speak, is Mother Earth. More intransigent than any government and more powerful than any army, she will win.

An economic system based on continuous



Evo Morales

Photo by Yve Saint-Pierre

growth cannot continue to exist in a world of limited resources. Things do not have to, indeed, cannot continue as they are. We cannot continue to spew methane, black carbon and CO₂ into the atmosphere. We must bring to an end our dependence on fossil fuels and we must do it quickly. As someone said at the conference, and I wish I could remember who to credit: "We didn't move out of the Stone Age because we ran out of stones."

As a substitute to a way of life based on "bigger, better, faster, more", many at the conference, particularly from the indigenous community, proposed the idea of *bien vivir*, living well as opposed to always striving to live better. In a sense, this idea underlay the entire tone and atmosphere of the conference. And it felt good and it felt right.

PS: The new draft negotiating text, (presented at the interim climate change conference in Bonn this June), ignores these Cochabamba agreements and instead incorporates ALL of the components of the Copenhagen Accord. Much remains to be done before the end of the year.

For more information:
pwccc.wordpress.com
www.climate-justice-now.org
peoplesclimatemovement.net

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Usually in this space I comment on content. Instead, in this issue, I would like to ap-

peal for submissions. This is your magazine, the magazine of Canada's humanist community. It should be as good, as intelligent, as articulate as the community that reads and supports it and usually it is. But there are a number of issues I think it important for us to consider and I'm not receiving submissions that deal with them. If you have strong and informed opinions on any of the following issues, I urge you to submit an article, or at the very least a letter.

In the near future I would like the subject of end-of-life explored. How do we deal with the elderly? Is the primary purpose of end-of-life medicine to forestall death as long as possible? What should end-of-life health care entail? How should it be practiced? If you have any knowledge and experience either as a health care professional or as a person with an elderly parent or relative, share your experiences and ideas with us.

Many First Nations communities across this country continue to experience more than their share of social ills. We hear about high suicide rates, inadequate housing, high rates of criminalization, substance abuse, the depredation of vital natural resources. We also hear about resourceful and successful initiatives in many

of these areas. If you are from a First Nations community or otherwise have experience of any of these things, positive or negative, let us know.

What is going on inside our prison system? Are Canadians well informed concerning how the portion of our money that goes to the prison system is spent and to what effect? Do we have any idea about the human problems present in the prison system and how they are dealt with?

Why is AA, a religion-based twelve-step program, still the dominant program for the treatment of alcoholics and other addicts, one to which the courts routinely refer perpetrators of alcohol-related offences? Is there not a secular, humanist treatment alternative and if not, why not? Do you have experience with AA? Do you have experience with alternative programs? Share your thoughts.

These are just some of the questions I would like to see addressed in future issues. This is a magazine for progressive, thoughtful, humanist readers. Help keep the content worthy of our intellectually astute and curious readership by becoming a contributor yourself. I look forward to hearing from you.

—Yves Saint-Pierre

Featured Letter

Asimov's Revolution

Dear Mr. Saint-Pierre,

Your excellent editorial on Asimov's new revolution, looking at the problems of our world from a different angle and expressed in different words, comes to much the same conclusions as my letter to Mr. Urquhart, Executive Director of the Council of Canadians whose copy I forwarded to you a couple of days ago.

Now I would like to make further comments on the matter. Please bear with me.

I certainly hope that the complex crisis Canadians and other societies face will eventually be resolved through peaceful means. I have survived two totalitarian systems—a Nazi and a Communist—as well as a world war. In 1956 I did my share in the Hungarian uprising. Honestly, I am fed up with violence as well as with violent solutions to serious problems.

However, my optimism in this regard is limited.

As the crisis in its complexity is global, it cannot be resolved domestically or unilaterally. A solution requires the cooperation of all societies, of all influential nations in particular. Start out with Canada. One third of the voters support the Harper government. The former Liberal government was just slightly less retrogressive and destructive than the present. As the previous elec-

tions demonstrated, when they go to the polls, the majority of voters put aside their concerns about the environment, deteriorating social, cultural and other standards, and give their votes to parties that promise tax reductions and more opportunities for 'affluent' lifestyles. They have been brainwashed into the idea that social welfare is a step towards communism, as well as into accepting the false concept of 'constant economic growth'. Hence I cannot see a change in future election results as there is no other party with realistic and workable ideas that can appeal to the majority of voters.

The same applies to the societies in the States, the UK and other so called 'developed' countries. What can we then expect from the developing and underdeveloped countries whose societies still dream of achieving our present standards of affluence? Who is going to tell them that their dream is unrealistic as even we will soon lose those standards under the impact of deteriorating environmental, social and other circumstances? Particularly so as some of those societies, like the Indian, Chinese and others, are increasingly becoming potential economic, political and military competitors of—what we arrogantly and mistakenly think of as 'superior'—the West!

On the basis of my life experiences with different political/economic systems and different degrees of totalitarianism my sad conclusion is that as the global crisis develops, it will be increasingly difficult to

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come to a peaceful solution. I am also certain that the American, Canadian, British and several other governments are well aware of this possibility. As they are also in the hands of transnational corporations that promote the interests of a negligible layer of the financial, industrial and military elite, any attempts to halt economic growth, stop excessive environmental exploitation and other measures to save our future survival will be regarded as direct threats to their wealth, power and privileged positions within the global societies. Consequently they are already preparing themselves to maintain their global control. In this light the real as well as fictional threats of terrorist attacks against the Western societies is an excellent excuse for that elite to intro-

duce drastic security measures, ostensibly against such real or fictional terrorists, but covertly also to strengthen their control over their own populations. Such measures in the UK are already comparable to those in Orwell's *1984*. They also remind me of the preliminary measures taken by both the Nazi and communist regimes in Eastern Europe before their full fledged terror systems. I regret to say, but the prognosis is dark.

What organizations like yours, the CCPA, the Council of Canadians and others should do domestically as well as abroad is to coordinate efforts within and between the global societies, find common denominators as well as effective means to get through to the ordinary public to convince them of extreme seriousness of the situation. If an adequate number of present governments fail to survive the next election, then there may be a glimmer of hope of gaining control over dominant elites and saving ourselves in the process. I fully realize the enormity of that task, but our choices are extremely limited and time is running out.

***—Frank S. Tompa, Pender
Island, BC***