

## **A Better World is Needed: The oh-so 'Canadian' style of dissent**

by kevin harding - Thursday, July 01, 2010

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It's Canada Day, which is apparently a day for Canadians all across the country to dress up in red and white and wave flags and yell "Oh Canada" and paint their faces and humbly comment on what a polite and kind country we are, because we're number one!

For me, Canada Day is an interesting holiday. I certainly acknowledge that this country -- this state, this creation of lines drawn on a map -- is a nice place to live. I'm lucky to have been born here. There are places in the world where I wouldn't be able to write things like this. But even as I acknowledge the relative comfort in which I live, I find myself acknowledging how much of a better world we could live in. There is exploitation and subjugation and destruction in the world.

To echo and twist the oft-repeated phrase, a better world is not only possible - it is needed. And Canada Day highlights this for me, as we celebrate the popular myth of Canada: the benevolent state that engages in cultural genocide, the peaceful state embroiled in foreign and domestic wars, the free state that does crushes basic human rights. Yes, a better world is needed. And we need to get there.

But thinking about how we do that and putting those thoughts into action is just as confusing as it is liberating. To me, one thing is simply obvious: the oh-so 'Canadian' way of dissent, that which is so polite, so pleasant, so quiet and careful, is rendered nearly meaningless when it comes face-to-face with the Canadian state, emblazoned with maple leaves but carrying shotguns. A better world is needed, and we need to actually work for it, not just hope that someone powerful might take pity on us.

My original idea for this piece was to question why so many activists in Canada see a desperate need to 'play by the rules' that the state sets out for dissent. This comes after the Toronto G8/G20 protests, where a fury of righteous indignation erupted after people happened to take to the streets, inconveniencing some commuters while police either encouraged property destruction or police [agents provocateurs](#) actively engaged in it themselves. A flurry of self-described progressives [rushed to condemn protesters and support the police](#), because some windows got smashed and some police cars burned.

Later, after the 'left' spent large amounts of time condemning itself, stories emerged that the [Toronto Police Service](#) was [enforcing a law that it knew didn't exist](#) in order to illegally search, question, identify, and detain activists, marchers, or residents who strayed within five meters of the military-style fence erected in the Toronto downtown. Stories emerged of [horrid conditions in the temporary detention camp](#) built in a movie studio. [Stories of threats of violence and rape emerged](#).

This is all part of the plan of the neoliberal state: impose policies that enforce capitalist expansion and exploitation, remove social programs, and delegitimize dissent. Capitalism may be protected, but nothing remains of liberty or democracy.

A better world is possible. A better world is needed. But we won't get there through the oh-so-Canadian style of dissent that so many left activists take to heart.

(more after the break... click 'read more' to continue)

### **Why don't you write a letter, eh?**

The popular, Canadian, mythology is that Canadians are the politest and friendliest people in the world, apologizing to each other continuously and saying "please and thank you" as frequently as we might sneeze.

It seems, frustratingly, that this Canadian paradigm of politeness extends to what so many NDP activists and self-styled progressives would consider to be 'activism.' The oh-so-Canadian style of activism is to note that there is injustice and wrong in the world, get angry, and *write a letter*. When it comes to protests, we should stick to the "safe assembly" or "free speech zones" that the state *gives* us in which to gather. And then run away when the police break their promise and run in and arrest everyone. We need to play by the rules.

We, so very polite Canadians, write our politicians letters and ask them, politely, to stop doing the things that harm so many. If we're particularly bothered, we might sign a petition, attend a scripted rally, or send a postcard. We might even do something so bold as to vote for the [NDP](#) or the [Bloc Québécois](#).

This is playing by the rules.

On Canada Day, we take pride in our 'democracy.' As my friend [Jasmin](#) writes, [that Canada has a democracy is a rumour](#). What we have instead is a [polyarchy](#) trending towards a fascist state. Our 'democracy,' such as it is, often resembles nothing more than an elaborate piece of performance art; we ceremoniously vote once every four years for people whose resemblance to each other is differentiated only by the colour of their ties. We vote for change, we vote for social justice, and yet we get more and more [neoliberalism](#) and less and less democracy and rights.

But still so many of the progressive political activists in Canada want us to play by the rules. They want us to write letters to the politicians who order fences erected in our cities and tens of thousands of police deployed in order to [enforce a separation between those who 'govern' and the 'governed.'](#) They want us to vote for a different party, a different colour of tie, a different flavour of neoliberalism.

It hasn't worked so far, so why should it now? This is why people protest. If we were to follow the rules, engagement in Canadian 'democracy' would be limited to ritual 'prayers' to politicians, infrequent petitions, and voting once every four years. [But how can we follow the rules when those who enforce them don't? How can we when they make them up? How can we when they lie to our faces repeatedly?](#)

The oh-so-Canadian style of dissent is to follow the rules and protest politely. To say, "oh, that's a shame, we better write a letter."

### **The Miami method and Canadian 'peaceful protest'**

Of course, I am not calling for unnecessary destruction or immediate insurrection. To do that would be play directly into the arms of the state.

It's fascinating to read some different accounts of the lead-up to the G20 and see the patterns across the world, when we look at major international summits and protest. Some people have remarked that it seems that protests follow the G8 and G20 meetings around the world; I would submit that it's not the protesters following the summits, but it is instead the summits avoiding the protests.

On Saturday, June 26, [Catherine Porter](#) of the [Toronto Star](#) published an article warning about the '[Miami Model](#)' of protest policing.

In her words,

They call it the Miami Model.

But it could be called the Genoa model, the Pittsburgh model and, after this weekend, the Toronto model.

It refers to police tactics used in Miami seven years ago, during the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit, and, more importantly, the protests erupting on the streets outside.

Manny Diaz, Miami's then-mayor, called the police methods exemplary — a model to be followed by homeland security when confronting protesters.

Human rights groups including Amnesty International called it a model of police brutality and intimidation.

Protesters were beaten with tear gas, sticks, rubber bullets . . . You can watch police stun cowering protesters with Tasers on YouTube. Last year, the city agreed it had trampled citizens' right to free speech by forcing marchers back from planned protests and settled out of court with Amnesty International.

The [Miami Model](#) of protest policing involves an intensive propaganda campaign to terrify the unlucky citizens of a city that has been chosen to 'host' an international summit. "Anarchists will descend upon the city. There will be violence." The propaganda aims to label activist protesters as anarchists and passive or

peaceful protesters as accomplices. The police infiltrate groups and act as *agents provocateurs*. There are pre-emptive arrests. There are crackdowns.

The police violate the rules of our democracy as they claim to protect it. This is what happens in dictatorships! The Pinochet coup in Chile was to protect the country. The dictatorship and dirty war in Argentina was to protect the country. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are to free those countries.

The massive amounts of police on our streets during these summits, during corporate orgies such as the Olympics, and during anything that might provoke dissent, are in order to protect our system, our state, our non-democracy as it is.

They can't let such dangerous concepts as democracy or freedom get out, you know.

### **'Violence' and protest**

The instant reaction on the part of the progressives who want to affect change by following the rules is to decry the 'violence' that they claim took place in Toronto.

This violence? Windows were broken and police cars were lit on fire. I'll repeat something that I wrote in a different story:

Smashing a window is not violence. It is destruction of property, certainly, but not violence. And the property being destroyed when someone smashes a window of a bank or a transnational corporation is but one manifestation of an inherently violent system, capitalism, which requires subjugation and exploited labour and alienation. The window of a bank is one manifestation of a system with forcibly enclosed public spaces, which removed people from lands and removes the product of peoples' work from their own control merely because they must work to survive.

Yes, windows were broken and property was destroyed. But to equate that with violence is to equate the worth of a window and a human. Here's a simple question: what is worth more to you, a window or a person? Is harming one worse than harming the other?

Answer that question, and then ask yourself if destroying a window -- which is a manifestation, or an outgrowth, of capitalism -- is worse than the *destruction of humans that capitalism routinely commits*.

Protests in the streets during international summits don't destroy people [unless it's the police doing the destroying](#). At the same time, [windows and capitalism kill people. In Toronto](#). And they weren't even protesting.

### **'Canadian dissent'**

Here's a question for you: if the government is doing something that you don't agree with, and you write it a letter, and the government not only keeps on doing what you don't like but *goes further* and *does worse*, what should you do?

Should you write a letter and ask the government not to do that?

Or should you work on creating communities, organising alternatives, and showing your dissent in concrete ways?

My next articles in this series will engage with these questions. Leave a comment (write a letter?) with your thoughts.