

Against Collective Forgetting

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, September 01, 2014

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Workers must do our part to Stop Harper!

Happy Labour Day! :)

In Stephen Harper's Canada, we keep enumerating the things we're losing: meaningful legislative debate, evidence-based policy, public science, a free and open society, among other things. But what happens if we go too long with a slow erosion of the features that make our society vibrant? What happens if we let the right wing continue to teach us that we shouldn't expect anything meaningful from government?

What happens if young Canadians grow up without a sense of what used to be the Canadian birthright: Medicare, the CPP, and a free and robust education system, for instance?

Many Americans suffer from this syndrome of unknown unknowns. They may have heard about Canada's amazing healthcare system, but they don't really know what they're missing.

Many Americans have been convinced that some faceless Orwellian bureaucrats from Health Canada constantly interfere with my doctor's ability to decide if I need liquid nitrogen on my warts, some kind of invasive prostate exam, or cancer treatment.

Ironically, it's Americans who suffer from faceless Orwellian bureaucrats who work for for-profit health insurance companies, companies that actually do interfere with those decisions. Canadian clinicians make decisions based on health considerations. Period.

But many Americans have been misinformed, which is part of the reason why Michael Moore's 2007 movie, *Sicko*, was such a revelation for so many. People simply didn't know what they didn't know: healthcare is a human right and can be provided sustainably, without profit-mongering.

But let's not be so self-righteous as to think that we've got it all together. In BC for example, 13 years of

Liberal governments have decimated funding for public education, inspiring wealthy parents to seek private school options. That's stealth privatization.

Now we have a whole generation of students who, compared to previous generations and to most of the rest of Canada, have been educated in a public system starved of investment. They don't know that it used to be so much better. They have what urban theorist Jane Jacobs called mass amnesia.

LABOUR'S UNKNOWN UNKNOWNNS

I continually write about how unions need to more effectively and meaningfully embrace a mindset of social unionism. But one of labour's unknown unknowns is that too many of our millions of members, and many of our staff, don't understand our own history: they don't know that for eight generations unions have played a central role in creating a society with more justice for all. So it is incumbent on us to provide education about why paying union dues is an investment in a better society, not a deduction to be resented.

That need to provide education goes along with labour's need to more effectively engage our members and help mobilize them to protect union rights in Canada.

HOW THE BROADBENT INSTITUTE HELPS US FILL THE GAP

We've also been unaware that we're missing a particular kind of organization that can support all this work: The emergence of the Broadbent Institute makes that clear.

Despite its namesake, the institute is a non-partisan organization that seeks progressive change because "a majority of Canadians favour progressive policies — and they are looking for new tools to build the Canada we want."

One of the Broadbent Institute's key functions is to provide space and convene people so they can develop more effective progressive action — an activity that happens too little in our busy labour organizations, and another necessity we often don't know we need.

I've watched the institute since its inception in 2011, when it first opened its doors in Ottawa. In June of 2014, it launched an event in BC.

The Vancouver inaugural event brought together close to 300 people from progressive groups, unions, political parties and more to connect with each other and to hear from Ana Maria Archila, an inspiring, Colombian-born New York leader of the Center for Popular Democracy, who used community organizing to mobilize immigrant voters in New York.

Archila spoke about how to de-silo our issues and engage with other progressive groups to build movements. I took away three core lessons:

1. We need to meet people where they live, play and gather. We cannot expect them to come to where we are. They don't. That's why they haven't come to us in the past. The key to effective organizing is listening to people's stories and truths and building from a place of empathy and understanding.

2. Coalition-building means working with people and groups we haven't worked with in the past, which demands that we get out of our comfort zone.

3. Organizations like unions, with staffing, resources and money, need to better support progressive organizations that are too grassroots to possess these capacities. This is one way we can share and build power.



In talking to people at the Vancouver event, I saw how varied their perspectives are about the roles that the Broadbent Institute can play: It produces research to advance progressive solutions. It has a powerful news and analysis portal, PressProgress.ca, to challenge conservative ideas. And while providing space and convening people, it provides training and focus so we can improve our activist processes and our ability to be intentional in our work.

Ultimately, we didn't know we needed the Broadbent Institute until it showed up to fill a gap in our work.

This piece first appeared in the Labour Day issue of [Our Times](#) labour magazine.