

Danny Williams, Class War, and the Illusion of Choice

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Wednesday, February 24, 2010

<http://politicsrespun.org/2010/02/danny-williams-class-war-and-the-illusion-of-choice/>

I was going to write something about the Newfoundland and Labrador premier skipping to Florida for minor heart surgery. [He said, "This is my heart, it's my health, it's my choice."](#)

I was going to write about how obvious the two-tier [class war] society is emerging in Canada.

I was going to write about how the private system drains medical talent from the public system.

I was going to write about how the rich and the poor deserve the best health care system Canada can provide.

I was going to write about the millions of Canadians who are too poor to choose to go to Florida and stay in a comfortable condo.

But then [Brian Topp wrote something spectacular!](#)

Tuesday, February 16, 2010 7:30 AM

Danny Williams and the separatism of the rich

Brian Topp

There is a depressing amount of material out there in the open-mouth-osphere, written by American know-nothing-party activists, crowing about Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams's decision to seek heart surgery in the United States. Proof, they are basically saying, that the Canadian health-care system cannot deliver basic services. And then the counter-offensive, which amounts to: "that's not true."

Advanced heart surgery is indeed usually promptly available in Canada to patients who need it. One of our system's real strengths is that it jumps on life-threatening health issues quickly once they are identified, as anyone who has spent any time in a hospital ER watching what happens when a truly seriously injured patient arrives can attest. Everyone has their stories to tell -- many of them sad, which is inherent in parables of illness and injury. I can testify, from a number of recent health issues that have danced in and around my family, that in my experience Canadian health professionals move quickly and with world-class care when they know they are dealing with a serious issue.

"World-class" is what the Danny Williams affair is really all about it. Specifically, the return of the world's class of rich folks to their ancient practice of building a cozy, comfortable and almost entirely separate world for themselves -- completely out of touch with the daily lives of most citizens.

So, for example:

Most people who travel by air wait for their flights in cramped, noisy, uncomfortable cattle pens. The wealthy amuse themselves at their ease in comfortable, attractive private airport lounges -- catching up on the Wall Street Journal, watching Fox News, and sipping a nice glass of red wine. The same tableau is then re-enacted on the airplane itself.

Most bank customers talk to their accounts through web pages and ATMs (an excellent way to do so, as it happens). The wealthy have personal attention lavished upon them, as banks and other financial institutions have come to focus on "wealth management" as their principal profit centre.

Tax codes in Canada and throughout the Western world are written by and for the rich. Labour codes are written by and for the rich (notably so in Ontario after the Mike Harris government).

James Cameron spent a great deal of a Hollywood studio's money to make this point in his film Titanic. Then, as now, the rich are shown into the boats when the good ship hits the iceberg. It is the men and women in steerage, the working families who painfully saved their crinkled pound notes for their tickets to get across the ocean and try to find a new life for themselves in the new world, who found themselves floating in the lethal North Atlantic, a few minutes from death.

Kind of like how governments in the industrialized West can pull together trillions of dollars in a matter of weeks to prop up and bail out speculators and profiteers who played computer games just a little too recklessly with our pensions and savings. While the same governments cannot find tiny fractions of those sums to end child poverty, illiteracy, or homelessness (this can't be done, a young soldier for the separatism of the rich explained to me during last year's coalition negotiations, because addressing those issues would be "fixed costs").

Kind of like how a rich man whose titanic ego (and remarkable energy) led him into the premiership of a Canadian province will not give two seconds' thought to the implications of buying himself care in an American health system tailor-made for wealthy people like himself. Even though he is himself the lead administrator of a public system built on fundamentally different -- and far better -- principles.

Rich people live in a separate world. And they spend less and less time thinking about the little people whose labour and more recently taxes, now and far into the future, pay for it.

Canada is a country that is, at its core, a rejection of racial, ethnic and linguistic separatism. Instead our country offers a better alternative -- flexible federalism and civic patriotism.

Perhaps Danny Williams has also given us cause to reflect on another core Canadian value. Canadians overwhelmingly also reject the separatism of the rich, at least as an organizing principle for public services. And therefore we reject a model of health care that reserves its best services for people like the Newfoundland Premier, while putting the same quality of service out of the reach of most citizens. Imperfectly, not without need for serious and on-going reform, our country offers an infinitely better alternative -- health care when you need it, regardless of your ability to pay. As do all developed countries except the United States.

Premier Williams has shown himself to be entirely out of touch with these values. As a wealthy individual he is free to buy whatever the market will sell him anywhere in the world. As a private individual he is

and should be free to make whatever decisions about his health he feels right. I wish him a safe and full recovery, and many good, healthy years with his family. But people like this should not be running governments in Canada. As recent economic events have so clearly shown, the public interest is the last thing on their minds.