

The Anti-Thanksgiving: Criminalizing Dissent in Canada

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, October 11, 2010

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This is no day for thanks. It is neither glorious, nor free.

Canadian governments have criminalized dissent to the point where we have become a shell of a sensible democracy. And we, like the frogs [or beavers] in a slowly boiling pot, are too complacent to do anything about it.

I have already written about our governments' [political harassment of Alex Hundert and Betty Krawczyk](#). Below are some updates that should motivate you to realize that thanksgiving is not a passive holiday, but a call to action to protect what we are thankful for.

I don't know Alex Hundert personally, but while his treatment encourages us to think he may be a criminal terrorist mastermind justifying his pre-emptive arrest at gunpoint before the G20 in Toronto, I seriously doubt it. \$1.1 billion in security funding leads to surreal behaviour.

Last Wednesday was the beginning of his bail hearing to determine if the police were justified in re-arresting him last month for breaking his bail condition by appearing at public demonstrations. He was a member of a [discussion panel at a public meeting at a public university](#). The police alleged that such an event constituted a demonstration. How absurd.

I know demonstrations. They involve signs, rallies, loud speakers, chants, marches, and the like. Public meetings at local universities or activist churches are meetings. Sure, dissent happens at both, but the first is an active assertion of attitudes designed to **demonstrate** to the public a certain political value. A meeting is a meeting.

I fully, yet it turns out naively, expected the judge to throw out the arrest within five minutes of the bail hearing beginning. [Not so](#). His bail hearing will continue this week.

So the police have asserted a new definition of a demonstration. This is designed to chill public dissent.

What happens if a faith group invites a social or political activist to speak at a service or weeknight prayer group? Is that a demonstration?

I fully knew that 6.5 years ago I was conducting a demonstration [when I organized the Vancouver chapter of Poets Against the War](#) to protest the Iraqi invasion and occupation.

Today, attending such a demonstration could be considered a violation of someone's bail conditions.

But what if I have a meeting in my house with 6 friends to discuss post-party socio-political mobilization? Is this something I should now be worried about?

This is a chill on public dissent.

What do you call societies that outlaw public dissent?

What do you call societies that issue bail conditions that prevent people from:

- [contacting each other, even if they are siblings](#)
- [using cellphones](#)
- [speaking with their common-law partner without adult supervision](#)
- [posting on Facebook](#)

The answer:

[“It's an attempt to silence our voice. I don't believe they are scared of what Alex and I will do ... they are concerned about our voice.”](#)

Naomi Wolff's spectacular book about the rise of soft fascism in Bush's America is useful here. It warns that we need to watch for [signs that our open society is closing](#). Elements of numbers 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 have been in Canada since before the G20 in Toronto:

1. Invoke a terrifying internal and external enemy.
2. Create secret prisons where torture takes place.
3. Develop a thug caste or paramilitary force not answerable to citizens.
4. Set up an internal surveillance system.
5. **Harass citizens' groups.**
6. **Engage in arbitrary detention and release.**
7. **Target key individuals.**
8. Control the press.
9. **Treat all political dissidents as traitors.**
10. **Suspend the rule of law.**

We lost the rule of law when hundreds of people were arrested and abused, and released without charge or after being charged under non-existent laws.

Not all political dissidents are considered to be traitors right now, but the rhetoric is that they are anti-Canadian. How much more of this tone can we safely tolerate? None. We have already tolerated too much.

Key individuals, the protest "ring-leaders," are suffering under conspiracy charges. Conspiracy has a connotation of doing something illegal or harmful. Protest is not illegal. But perhaps that's naive too, now.

Arbitrary detention and release? Ask the hundreds of people rounded up in Toronto.

Harassing citizen groups is what happens when people who organize public meetings at public universities have one of their panelists arrested, or [when a group of peaceful protesters met with a line of](#)

[riot police in the street spontaneously sing the national anthem, only to find that the moment they finish singing, the riot police rush the crowd.](#)

All I know now is that it is no longer as legal in Canada to hold a Poets Against the War reading at a restaurant as it was 6.5 years ago. I also know that organizing such an event with another person can lead to conspiracy charges.

Should I fear arrest if I book a lecture hall at a local university to discuss liberty and [screen the film based on Naomi Wolff's End of America](#) along with [some YouTube videos](#) of protesters terrorized and snatched by riot police in Toronto during the G20?

Ultimately, the government is now asserting that this tone of terror created by the riot police, [especially beginning at the 7:30 mark of this video](#) [the most disturbing documentation of the G20 protests for me since I routinely bring my children in strollers to demonstrations], is a new benchmark for people to expect if we wish to express dissent.

So what can we do about these abuses and erosion of our social contract, democracy and free speech?

Firstly, the House of Commons Public Safety Committee has committed to an inquiry to explore the G20 abuses starting two weeks from today. They will "[hear a maximum of 30 witnesses or groups on G8 and G20 issues on October 25 and 27, November 3 and December 1 and 6, 2010.](#)" You can [contact the updated list of MPs](#) on this committee to express your commitment to democracy and the right to free speech and protest without government abuse.

You can [follow the Committee meetings with live or archived audio webcasts](#), meeting minutes and witness testimony to hear which MPs and political parties support or obstruct an authentic inquiry into the abuses to democracy at the G20.

Secondly, challenge your favourite media outlet to cover this Committee inquiry when they inevitably don't report on it, its potential for supporting democracy or implications if it is ineffective.

Thirdly, participate as a citizen. Research the Alex Hundert bail hearing this week to make sure you find out what happens. Talk with your people about what liberty and the right to protest means to you. Then be vigilant.

Democracy is a muscle. Not exercising it leads to atrophy.

We do not deserve a democracy we don't fight for.

In an era where the stakes are insanely high [climate change, peak oil, peak water, crisis in capitalism, the simplistic and simple-minded lure of totalitarianism], we cannot afford to simply trust that our leaders are benign.

They've demonstrated that they are not the guardians of democracy countless times. For citizens to refuse to be the guardians is a moral crime unto each other.

We must expect more from ourselves and our peers.