

## Government and Human Wretchedness

by Guest Contributors - Monday, June 25, 2012

<https://politicsrespun.org/2012/06/government-and-human-wretchedness/>

What is government if not a living reminder of our human wretchedness, of the fall made secular, of the post-lapsarian world and the prison house of procedure and law that outlines and structures our existence? Our political institutions are decorated with the heritage of Christianity and Western civilization, and no matter how hard we try to be secular in unwritten form, we as Canadians are procedurally still beneath a monarchy crafted in the ages of kings and queens. The question—if we cannot control ourselves, then who will?—echoes in the halls of western government, and no less in the legislative assembly of British Columbia, where I had the opportunity to spend two days sitting in the press gallery, observing the BC Liberals as they attempted to control themselves, and in the process portray the proper conduct of humans governing humans.

Before we get to far into this, I want you to know some of my motivations (*some*): the question of whether or not we can govern ourselves through some form of direct democracy will be behind my future contributions. The motivation to create new institutions in-between and out-of old ones inspires me, and is also constantly hanging behind these, my public words. I am inspired by the recently deceased [Elinor Ostrom](#) to continue to articulate the empirical complexities of collective action and governance without recourse to panaceas like ‘market’ or ‘state’, like ‘community control’ or ‘centralization’. Because of this love of the fragmented and the material, of the difficult conceptual and pragmatic intersections collapsed in the term ‘socio-ecological’, I have a certain distaste for approaches that involve some random number of principles, guidelines, programs, etc. As my good friend once put it after a seminar I led on Ostrom’s work, ‘everyone seems to have their 5 or 6 or 10 principles, that if everyone else followed, would surely change the world.’ We don’t need any more tight interlocking systems of digits and concepts, we need messy data, known unknowns, unknown unknowns, and other glorious uncertainties—and we need to embrace their complexities and work through them in collaborative gestures of direct democratic decision-making that involve experts and laypersons alike. (At least this is what we try to do at [The Wayward School](#).)

Alas, the political world is not built in such a way as to gear well with an appreciation of complexity. During the two times that I sat in the press gallery of the BC Legislature, I witnessed the use of science to supposedly settle a long-standing issue of great complexity, uncertainty, and impact... namely pesticide use and its effect on human and environmental health. In my next piece, I will briefly explore the way that the material recalcitrance of pesticides was represented and navigated through the ‘conduct of humans governing humans’, and offer some reflections about the history of science and policy in the western political tradition. Throughout my contributions, I hope to outline a few useful ways of recasting the same “critical socio-political intersections” that the [Manning Centre for Building Democracy](#) explores in their [School of Practical Politics: Business-Politics; Faith-Politics; Economy-Environment](#).

Needless to say, I’m going to try to think through how these critical socio-political intersections can be navigated in a way to *include* the public in the articulation and co-creation of values and policies related with them, rather than how they can be navigated to *capture* the public in frames and schemas for

thinking and acting that lead us toward the endless pursuit of panacea. To open this necessary can of worms requires us to consider a fourth intersection: that of the socio-political to socio-ecological.

I believe humans have good days and bad days. We have some days where we are angels capable of mystical anarchism, and others when we are wretched sinners in need of a mediator (read: government) between our scrubby human filth and some transcendent realm of goodness. I do believe that we must govern our worst behaviors and our bad habits, but I don't think the current system of representation can handle this task in any meaningfully inclusive way. So, next time I will talk about pesticides in BC, along with all this other stuff. I hope you will follow me.