

## Monbiot, Progressive Activism and What's Wrong With Toronto

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Tuesday, October 26, 2010

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Toronto, ok greater Toronto, elected Rob Ford as mayor. Canada is a pariah of climate change activism and at the UN. We can't stop Stephen Harper from being prime minister. Canada is no longer my Canada.

But why?

In my seemingly endless quest to figure out [why progressive activists are fighting resignation and cynicism](#) instead of global neoliberal capitalism and the tremendous threats to universalism, communitarianism and social progress, I finally got the courage to read [one of George Monbiot's recent pieces](#). I started it a few times, but I needed to be in the right kind of stable, emotional headspace to not get all depressed.

He addresses why people make self-destructive political decisions:

Instead of performing a rational cost-benefit analysis, we accept information which confirms our identity and values, and reject information that conflicts with them. We mould our thinking around our social identity, protecting it from serious challenge. Confronting people with inconvenient facts is likely only to harden their resistance to change.

This is why films like An Inconvenient Truth didn't lead most of the OECD world to sell their cars over the last few years.

But more, Monbiot writes:

Politics alters our minds as much as our circumstances. Free, universal health provision, for example, tends to reinforce intrinsic values. Shutting the poor out of healthcare normalises inequality, reinforcing extrinsic values. The sharp rightward shift which began with Margaret Thatcher and persisted under Blair and Brown, all of whose governments emphasised the virtues of competition, the market and financial success, has changed our values.

[What's the Matter with Kansas?](#) is part of Canada now with Mayor Ford. But then maybe Canada was never as progressive as I nostalgically recall?

I think it was, it's just that after three decades of neoliberal individualism, the evil doers are eroding our culture of compassion and community.

Conservatives in the United States generally avoid debating facts and figures. Instead they frame issues in ways that both appeal to and reinforce extrinsic values. Every year, through mechanisms

that are rarely visible and seldom discussed, the space in which progressive ideas can flourish shrinks a little more.

Like faith-based policy making among US conservatives, Harper's blatant rejection of the long-form census, real data, and evidence-based policies reduces the space for compelling arguments that violate his beliefs.

The progressive response to this trend has been disastrous. Instead of confronting the shift in values, we have sought to adapt to it. Once-progressive political parties have tried to appease altered public attitudes.

This explains [why so many progressives are disillusioned](#) with the organizations that we have historically turned to for political expression. In Monbiot's analysis, we must:

stop seeking to bury our values and instead explain and champion them. Progressive campaigners, it suggests, should help to foster an understanding of the psychology which informs political change and show how it has been manipulated. They should also come together to challenge forces – particularly the advertising industry – which make us insecure and selfish. Ed Miliband appears to understand this need. He told the Labour conference that he “wants to change our society so that it values community and family, not just work” and “wants to change our foreign policy so that it's always based on values, not just alliances ... We must shed old thinking and stand up for those who believe there is more to life than the bottom line.”

So if we find our progressive political parties refuse to commit to principles or policies that are rooted in our sense of a civilized culture with a progressive agenda, we become disillusioned. We are constantly searching for champions who will actually pursue our goals. But that might be a futile vestige of some nostalgia past.

Monbiot's warning reminds us why organizations that are not political parties are attracting so much activist talent lately:

We cannot rely on politicians to drive these changes. Those who succeed in politics are, by definition, people who prioritise extrinsic values. Their ambition must supplant peace of mind, family life, friendship - even brotherly love.

So we must lead this shift ourselves. People with strong intrinsic values must cease to be embarrassed by them. We should argue for the policies we want not on the grounds of expediency but on the grounds that they are empathetic and kind; and against others on the grounds that they are selfish and cruel. In asserting our values we become the change we want to see.

The citizen politician. The citizen leader. The citizen activist. Gandhi said it too: "we must be the change we want to see in the world."

When the people lead, the leaders will follow. [This is the threat that Alex Hundert and the other G20 harassed activists represent](#): the people rising up against a corrupt state that actively opposes the best interest of the populace and the planet.

So it makes sense that 30 years of neoliberal brainwashing leads us to a place where we can tolerate massive assaults on the rule of law we have seen at the G20, and a Glenn Beck for mayor in Toronto.

And while the political sociologists will have a good time trying to explain how Calgary and Toronto ended up with each other's mayors, the rest of us have an uphill battle of redefining a progressive culture against the politicians, corporations and media all designed to individualize us.

Time to roll up our sleeves and start hosting more salons!