

Government Addictions

—Brian Dijkema—

“What expertise does a Crown corporation have in running a hot dog stand in a casino?”

It’s a good question, but it’s the wrong one. Ontario’s finance minister, Dwight Duncan, should have asked, “What is a Crown corporation doing taking revenues from a casino at all?”

OLG, the government corporation which oversees gambling in the province of Ontario, recently rolled out a new business plan which clears a whole new path and purpose for gambling in Ontario.

As Adam Radwanski notes in the *Globe*, “The new vision for OLG adds up to something radically different—a tough-minded (some would say cold-blooded) business plan without any of the usual moral squeamishness.”

The *moral squeamishness* which Radwanski describes is the government’s former propensity to see its involvement in the lottery and gaming industry as a barrier to the licentiousness, vice, and social ills that might come as a result of less-regulated gambling activity in the province. The OLG’s predecessor, the Ontario Lottery Corporation, was founded to provide Ontarians with the fun of a little bet here and there while taking the money spent on these harmless vices and returning it back to communities as an unexpected windfall. The deal was clear: the government allows its citizens a little fun and returns the vice money back into culture and recreation. Here’s what the Ontario government said when it spent the first pennies of revenue from gaming—a \$3.5 million dollar investment in TVO:

As honourable members know, the Ontario Lottery Corporation Act dedicates Lottario proceeds to cultural and recreational activities and facilities. This is the very first Lottario allocation that has been made. Frankly, I cannot think of a more useful way to spend the money. I would emphasize that only the one-time capital investment in this extension is coming from lottery proceeds. *We will not be depending on lottery proceeds for the continuing operation of the new facilities.* (emphasis mine)

Vicious games fund virtuous games, and the government watches over everything to make sure no one gets hurt.

Well, that was then. This is 2012. As Radwanski says, “Now, for the first time, it will be purely about profit. With what is somewhat euphemistically described as a ‘more market-driven and consumer-responsive’ strategy, Ontario will try to milk every single dollar there is to be spent.”

The OLG proudly notes that it generated 3.2 billion dollars of economic activity in 2010, with almost 2 billion dollars of gambling revenue. And it expects to generate an additional 1.3 billion with its new plan. A tidy profit no doubt, but if the government’s only in it for the profit, one has to ask: on what grounds is the government in it at all?

The same question should be asked of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO). If profit is the only motive for a government monopoly over a given good or service (e.g. alcohol or gaming), on what grounds do we oppose government exerting greater control over other industries, especially as the financial pinch really begins to hurt?

Perhaps there remains some altruism in the government’s motives. But I think it’s more likely the government is doing what any other addict does: lying to itself while self-destructing.

Look at Those Cavemen Go

—Peter Stockland—

As Canada’s media and political exhibitionists scandalize themselves with tales of robo-dialed phone calls, real robotics overhead have humanity on the further edge of wonder.

This August, barring catastrophe, a robotic rover named *Curiosity* will be climbing a mountain on Mars. The six-wheeled explorer will parachute down to the Martian surface, cross a plain and ascend a mountain slope, sampling rocks and atmosphere as it goes.

By then, of course, terrestrial gossip foragers will no doubt have long forgotten our late winter imbroglio over the use of automated dialing machines to misdirect voters away from polling stations in the 2011 federal election.

Though each day’s new robo-call revelation is revealed to us as the gravest imaginable threat to Canadian democracy, at summer’s end we will certainly have been provided whiffs of equally ominous instances of corruption and depravity.

Yet there *Curiosity* will be, rumbling along, digging and sniffing real dirt in a landscape far from our own. It will, as a matter of mission, be sending back to NASA a tourist’s trove of photographs, one of which might—who knows?—contain the evidentiary inklings of life. Ho-hum.

This mix of insatiable earthbound muck sucking and our utter ennui at the stunning achievements of our species is the genuine scandal of our age. It constitutes the loss, not just of some ephemeral notion of political innocence or even rectitude, but of the quality that distinguishes us from everything else. That would be our wonder.

We should, naturally, attend to wrongdoing, trivial or tragic, that presents itself in front of our noses. The attention must, however, be proportional. Incessantly projecting our errors against the sky obliterates our accomplishments but also our light, our spirit.

Indeed, a recent article I read on the upcoming *Curiosity* expedition emphasized how much Mars itself has become a solar system Holiday Inn: no surprises.

According to science writer Oliver Morton in a recent issue of *Intelligent Life*



Curiosity, NASA’s robotic rover, is set to be exploring Mars in August 2012.

magazine, the geography *Curiosity* will travel through is about as well mapped as downtown Manhattan.

“*Curiosity* will never round a corner and reveal a vista unexpected by the scientists monitoring its progress,” Morton writes. “Its data may surprise; its otherworldly surroundings will not.”

The sense of jadedness implicit in those sentences touches the core of the problem. When, how, and why have we come to a cultural closing where the prospect of climbing mountains on Mars is engaging only for the data sets it will provide rather than as an astonishing celebration of humanity’s gifts? Even more importantly, I think, why should mere familiarity with the fruits of those gifts extinguish our capacity to be endlessly provoked to wonder by them?

We are, after all, presumed to still crave the limitless mundane minutiae flaunted by our media and political exhibitionists. The dust and dirt beneath our shoes is supposed to obsess us while awe at the Heavens is written off with a bored, neglecting shrug.

Perhaps during an improbable pause between bouts of manufactured outrage, someone somewhere will look up and ask why. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if that were to happen just as *Curiosity* begins its ascent?

Grab your Bag. It’s On.

—Robert Joustra—

So says Southwest Airlines, and so said Chris Seiple in his February address, “Bring It,” at the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE). IGE is one of those hot spots insomniac undergrads (and some doctoral students) lay awake dreaming about working for. And that’s no small wonder, judging by how Seiple brought it in this address to the United States Naval Academy.

His message is this: “As you engage globally, the in-broken Kingdom of God resides in you through Jesus. And if you live His commands, you will bring His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. He will build it.” Three simple points follow.

Point number one: *Engage the world because you have been changed.*

Not long ago the chaplain at my university sponsored a discussion on Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Altar in the World*. It stirred up some controversy, not least in a room of the dominantly Protestant for its seeming deferral of world changing theology. Over and over Taylor hinted, sometimes outright stated, that the only thing in this life we can really change, the only evil we can truly overcome, are those things within. Culture changing academics and world-weary wonks squirmed at this easy genuflection to the external status quo. Any Calvinist will tell you evil lies within, but surely that confession does not absolve us of righting injustice, of reforming social architecture. Righting evil within is not always necessary for righting evil without. Sometimes bad people do good things. Call that an accident. Call it grace.

Seiple’s can-do spirit needles that awkward dichotomy. Taylor is probably right that

our greatest battles, our hardest tests, are about right orientation, about the worship of God, and the denial of self. Only out of that change, only out of lived testimony, can the audacity of justice in the face of injustice be pursued. Who can preach, after all, that society must be compassionate, until we have experienced grace ourselves? How can we evangelize until our hearts have been evangelized? If there’s a harder lesson for a young person to learn, I don’t know it: if you’ve got something to prove, stay home.

Point two: *walk in others’ shoes as he first walked in ours.* The denial of self renders relationship possible, subverting how we need to be met, how we need to be understood, and empathetically imagining and engaging where others are. Maybe others are in a bad place. Maybe they’re wrong. Maybe they are lepers and prostitutes, libertarians or lefties, where conversation feels soiling, and it can only begin through denial.

That’s where Seiple says point three bleeds through: *bring the kingdom of God as his ambassadors of reconciliation.* But there’s no skipping steps, no cheating ahead. And most of us, if I am any example, don’t get far past that first point.

To be a better leader, says Seiple, be a better Christian. To change the world, be changed yourself. I’ve stumbled around points one through three most of my life, and I don’t think there is anything straight forward about that. The hardest challenge of our lives doesn’t stare at us from a globe away, from a degree too far, or from beyond a powerful promotion, but nestles itself right at home within.

So grab your bag. It’s on.

Time to Stop Doubling Down on Short-termism

—Jonathan Wellum—

Over the past four decades, the developed economies have gone on the biggest debt bender in history. The current level of global indebtedness, coupled with the massive unfunded government entitlement promises, are conservatively valued at over six times (6x) global GDP. Greece, and the other Club Med countries, are a mere warm up act considering the financial insolvency of the European Union, United Kingdom, Japan, and the U.S.

Simply stated, none of these jurisdictions have a hope of ever paying down even a portion of their accumulated liabilities, with non-debased money. They are each so strapped with debt and entitlement that none of them can currently service their interest (despite rates being close to zero), without borrowing more money or resorting to the printing press. The problem is clear and flooding the financial markets with baseless liquidity and “creating inflation” will not fix a solvency crisis.

Only morally insolvent central bankers with dilapidated spreadsheets, and no real world knowledge, could equate inflation with growth and continue to argue for more monetization of debt.

There are three things that I find shocking in all of this bungling. First, the short-termism of our policymakers is breathtaking. How can more debt, more money printing, more government, more manipulation of the markets and interest rates do anything but strangle private initiative and drive real capital and savings out of the economy? At the very moment when we need more capital and savings to de-leverage us from this debt nightmare, policymakers undermine the very formation of savings and investment by taking interest rates to zero.

The second stunning aspect is the willingness, nay desperation on the part of the “market” and its participants to go along with our leaders knowing the increasing danger ahead. Lastly, it is astonishing to see how easily the concepts of democracy and the rule of law—two significant pillars of the Western world—can be tossed aside and trampled on when the will of the people varies from the political elite and their twisted ideology.

The four components of GDP are government spending, consumption, investments, and net exports. It is remarkable that the most important component of our GDP, investments, is the very one that policymakers continue to emasculate! On the other hand, the bloated government sector, which is inefficient and indebted and needs to dramatically downsize, continues to grow.

This cannot continue. Citizens, whether they like it or not, will have to assume a substantial portion of their own retirement, healthcare, and education costs. The free or “borrowed” lunch is over.

In order to ensure the long-term prosperity of our economy, consumption—which is approximately 70% of our GDP—must also shrink, with the difference going directly into savings and investments. It is only a capital-rich, competitive, and efficient economy that will be able to effectively compete in the global economy, enhance our net export opportunities, and grow real long-term jobs in our country.

The path our policymakers should be pursuing is to slowly increase interest rates, to reward savings, and to re-establish a cost to our money.

Concurrently, they must put an end to the reckless debasement of our paper currencies through so-called quantitative easing which, in the short run, only benefits debtors and speculators—the very ones that should be punished and subjected to competitive market forces. We must immediately normalize the market mechanism and restore real non-manipulated prices so that wealth flows back into the hands of the frugal, enterprising, entrepreneurial, and saving class where it belongs, and away from the debtors, bankers, and the public sector.