

Epitaph for the Truly Public, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

1 February 2012

Dear Editor,

Tonight we were watching The National on the network that still calls itself CBC. We caught it a bit late into the program, after unwinding from our busy days. At this stage our attention spans are falling off quickly, but suddenly we perked up. A short, breathless opening about all the controversy over Stephen Harper's proposal to restructure Old Age Security! Cue the clip of the PM reassuring Canadians that his changes will only affect people who will be retiring far into the future. It won't affect anyone nearing retirement today. Crescendo with his declaration that he is acting to reassure young Canadians who are concerned that the system just isn't sustainable.

Oh. This. Sounds. Familiar. Says the American in the house. Has the PMO become a franchise of Washington, DC right-wing think tanks?

Younger people today don't believe welfare-state benefits are sustainable, and so we must act to reduce or privatize those welfare-state benefits. If the patient is afraid she might be hit by a bus tomorrow, hit her over the head right now. Again. Harder.

But now the brilliant move: cut quickly from that short intro about the future sustainability of Canada's Old Age Security system, to ... a city in California that overbuilt its fancy library in the debt binge of the last decade. Now they can't afford to hire workers for the new facilities because ...

they made pension promises to public employees ...

... and this now consumes 79 percent of the city's budget.

Wow, 79 percent!

[a big pie chart and then a big, enlarging 79 that scared us even without that 3D HD stuff the advertisers all tell us we've got to have]

... and this is just not sustainable ...

We both said it at the same time: "Here it comes...!"

... because the government gave too much to the unions. "Yes, it was the unions, yes!" we chanted in unison. Of course, it was all those greedy retiring city workers! Librarians and custodians and social workers, oh my! All that time we spend polluting our minds checking in just to see what the bloviators are up to on Fox News, it seems, is not wasted after all. Grover Norquist is leaning in the doorway with a smile as Harper wrestles with Trudeau, Chrétien, and Tommy Douglass in the bathtub. You remember Norquist's famous quip, don't you? "I'm not in favor of abolishing the government: I just want to

shrink it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub.”

Scare young people, tell them that Canadians can't keep promises we've made to each other (and even to some shady Americans who still haven't finished the citizenship application). It's not sustainable, because we've made too many promises to your parents and grandparents. It's their fault, so that's why we have to get rid of it .. and give you the 'choice' and freedom of your own personal investment account. In the stock market. We offer very competitive management expense ratios and trading commissions.

And tell Canadians that they should fear the sustainability of the Canadian social contract because ... cities in California are going bankrupt because of their greedy old union geezers. Shh, Wall Street had nothing to do with this.

“We've got to comment on this.”

It took thirty-five minutes of rooting around the CBC's website before we found the place to submit comments. Maybe it's just us. We should really be able to figure things out in this world of 4G and Web 2.0-or-whatever-it-is-now. We're at the demographic 45 degree angle. But Grover and his buddies in Washington remind us that the market is always right, and that means consumers are always right. Consumers, not citizens, are what matters.

This means that our inability to quickly and easily locate the comments section on the story is your fault.

Please don't fix this problem yourself. The logic of your story tonight suggests that you should fire some of your workers and hire private contractors instead. We really don't like that option, but apparently you do. We are deeply disappointed, and saddened.

We know you have hard-working professional journalists at what used to be called CBC, and they respect facts. So maybe we'll just go back and watch the clip again so we make sure we check our facts on the details. Oh, we see you're now selling lots and lots of ads for the public eyeballs on the site! Facts used to require patience. Now they require sponsors. Ah, we'll forgo the fact-checking. We're afraid fact checking is not going to be sustainable much longer.

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...Oh, the ironies of spending so much time on the website ... now we flip over to CTV for one last glance at what's happening, and we hear the story of the raucus caucus and the “staggering reversal” as Harper backs down.

We flip off the television. It's time to go to bed. The damage done to our brains is this: We see a CBC story that should scare anyone our age and younger who's trusting enough to believe the CBC. OAS is unsustainable! Maybe we should undermine it! Let's cut taxes while we're at it, so we can say we've got to tighten our belts to pay off the deficit.

Then the coverage of the controversy and the PM's sudden reversal comes to us from ...
Canada's largest private broadcaster.

Maybe the CBC did a follow up, but at this point we were cynical as well as tired. But don't forget: tired customers with short attention spans are still always right. The market is always the answer, no matter the question.

Is this some strange, quid privatized quo?

Oh, that's a conspiracy theory.

Note for tomorrow: flip over to Fox and see if they're screaming about the power of Canada's left-wing socialists threatening to undermine the Conservative hero who led Canada through the valley of the shadow of capitalist death in 2008...

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