

Our “slingshot” against corporate Goliath: the vision of a better world

By Ed Finn

Time for another verbal wrestling match as we return once more to the central issue of our lost democracy and how best to work for its restoration.

The reason this problem overshadows all others is because, without a government that is responsive to the needs of the majority, the many social, economic and environmental ills that bedevil us can never be adequately addressed.

Some localized gains can be made. Some temporary relief can be achieved. But the creation of the “better world” we seek can come only when the levers of political power are wrested from the wielders of corporate power—when government of, by, and for the people becomes a reality.

A good way to get into this discussion would be to ponder the points made by Martin Khor of the Third World Network in our last issue. He refers to what he calls the “two conflicting paradigms that civil society is now facing”—either trying to reform and humanize economic globalization from within, or working to attack and demolish it from outside.

Those who still call or write their MPs, present briefs to parliamentary committees, and work in election campaigns on behalf of candidates they admire could all be considered first-paradigm practitioners. Those who have concluded that corporate rule can only be effectively opposed from outside—through street protests, boycotts, and by setting up self-reliant, community-based economies as alternatives to globalization—are working within the second paradigm.

As Khor concedes, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. He himself divides his time between the two, as I’m sure do many Canadians. It’s possible to press for less regressive laws and policies while still grabbing your protest sign and joining in the next demonstration. But is this diffusion of effort defensible? Can you avoid being co-opted by the neoliberal globalizers while interacting with them? Can you always keep in mind that your ultimate objective is to get rid of the hideously inequitable economic system they preside over?

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Most of the feedback I received from readers to my previous foray into this subject (in the April issue) came from those who shared my belief that efforts to reform or improve corporate rule from within are futile. A few, however, still hadn’t abandoned political action within the existing parameters.

A couple of respondents—Sam Moore of Creston, B.C., and Tim Clark of Toronto—are Green Party enthusiasts and felt I should be urging people to join and support it. As it happens, I’ve voted for Green candidates myself in recent elections and hope that party can eventually win some seats. But the Greens alone can’t realistically be seen as the vehicle to carry us into a democratic future. They’re great on environmental issues, but tend to lack the broader social and economic perspectives that would appeal to a wide range of vot-

ers. As we can see in Europe, where they have won seats in several countries, the Greens very usefully serve as champions of the environment in coalition governments, and may some day fill that role in Canada. But what’s needed in the meantime is a movement for participatory democracy that is essentially non-partisan.

The fight, after all, is between the followers of conflicting ideologies—between those who run and profit from (or merely endorse) a system of globalized greed and those who want to replace it with a better world. It could be described, politically, as a struggle of the “left” against the “right,” but morally it’s really the “right” against the “wrong.” If we lived in a democracy, it would make sense to seek our salvation in the realm of partisan politics. But, living as we do under corporate rule, we only help to perpetuate it by channeling our opposition through a warped electoral process. Better by far to see the epic struggle mainly—if simplistically—as being waged between the “good guys” (us) and the “bad guys” (them), with political partisanship only one of many strategies that may be tried when practical and convenient. And let’s not forget that partisan politics is by its very nature divisive, and what’s required now in the ranks of the political left and moral right is unity.

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I had a nice letter from Bernice Baldwin of Warren, Manitoba, who felt she was being effective both as a protester and as a supporter of David Orchard in his bid for the leadership of the federal Tories. She admired Orchard for “challenging the corporate world” and for his vocal opposition to free trade over the past 16 years. In my reply, I conceded that Orchard might have been able to use the PC leadership platform to get his anti-free-trade message to more Canadians (if the media were paying any attention to him). But I added that, even in the highly improbable event that Orchard won the contest, he would never be able to pull the Tories one millimetre closer to the left—or even the centre. As gently as I could, I was implying that Bernice, and Orchard, too, were challenging the corporate Goliath before arming themselves with the requisite slingshot.

The slingshot, or its equivalent, is going to take more time to build. What form it will take is still unknown, but unquestionably it will not be so much a weapon—one that attracts and inspires and galvanizes a lot more people than we now number in the civil society organizations.

John Ayers (address unknown), in his e-mail to me, offers the vision of democratic socialism, which he claims has never been truly put into practice, least of all in the old Soviet Union. “We will never have democracy,” he argues, “until we have the truth about just what socialism is and we have that alternative on our ballots.”

He could be right, but again any hypothetical jump from the undemocratic present to a democratic future—socialist

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