

On March 7th, in Oak Bay Village, energetic protestors rallied from the lawn at City Hall to raise awareness about the last remaining ancient forests. The demo began at Liberal MLA Ida Chong's office.

You can sign a petition at www.voteforoldgrowth.org

Photo:
Diane Walsh, M.A.
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ALL THE KING'S MEN

by Brian Mason

Living things naturally try to maintain a biological equilibrium; it's what life from the cellular level on up is all about.

So, too, with social systems: they try to preserve their status quo. But in the case of social systems the status quo is often the cause of the trips and falls in the first place. Global capitalism, for example, resembles a big, expensive SUV speeding out of control, endangering the lives of its occupants as well as everyone and everything nearby. Now that it (global capitalism) has suddenly developed engine problems (the economic meltdown), forcing it to slow down and proceed in a safer manner, the driver and occupants (the elites and developed nations) are unhappy with this turn of events. They want to undertake immediate repairs, regardless of the financial cost, so that they can resume and enjoy their reckless ride. Let's call the tendency to want to put everything back together again as it was before the humpty-dumpty syndrome – and it's a close cousin to Naomi Klein's shock doctrine. Let me explain.

For Klein, a social or economic crisis provides the sufficient conditions for (usually outside) political and economic elites to impose their agenda on the situation in order to profit financially. Crisis, in other words, creates opportunity – at least for the wealthy – because its victims are in shock and easily exploited. In Klein's examples, it has been neo-liberal capitalists who have taken advantage of crises to impose their programs, policies and propaganda on a distraught population that would not accept them in normal circumstances (that is, in the absence of the crisis). Reconstruction projects in Iraq, which produce huge profits for American companies, are an ongoing example. Post-Katrina New Orleans was another. Immediately after the catastrophic hurricane, neo-liberal corporate opportunists – who just happened to have their financing in place and their agenda ready to roll out – moved in to privatize whatever services they could (for example, schools and hospitals) and to protect upscale developments at the expense of poor neighbourhoods and public housing. It was the disaster-capitalism-complex at work, with profitable opportunities emerging from the receding waters of the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. It was, in other words, the shock doctrine.

Now let's look at humpty-dumpty. In a recent issue of U, the University of Calgary's alumni magazine, six of that institution's "top policy experts" were asked to identify the most significant issue facing the world today and suggest what could be done about it. Five of the six approached the question from a business perspective, most choosing some version of the economic crisis as the top issue. Their comments ranged from such gems as "growing the economy ... is of utmost importance" to "a strong economy creates a lot of good things" to the need to get "people spending again" (this last from the Dean of the School of Business). One argued that lower priced oil could have helped resuscitate the auto industry and stabilize the airlines. None questioned the nature of the system that was broken; they just wanted it fixed quickly. It was left to the lone woman, the Dean of Social Work, to point out that "the profit motive and economic bottom line for companies can't be the driver for everything that happens in our society." Yet even she, while choosing social and economic inequality as the globe's single biggest issue, saw the solution as coming chiefly from corporate players in the marketplace who could restore the system's equilibrium.

In an unrelated article in the same issue, a professor of engineering observed, in connection with his work on land tenure in Africa, that "one-third of the world's population live in slums." That's about 2.2 billion if his figure is correct. Think about it! Five of the six policy experts featured elsewhere in the magazine more or less argued in support of immediately getting the global SUV going again at full speed (though possibly with a different blend of fuel) to perpetuate an economic system that has made slum dwellers out of one-third of humanity. At this point, even humpty-dumpty would want to be left alone.

My initial reaction of stunned disbelief upon reading the policy experts article (titled, ironically, Policy Powerhouse) soon settled back into a knowing nod of the head: of course this was the best they could come up with. To have expected the bureaucratized intelligentsia to depart radically from the corporate ambient mentality of Alberta, whose universities sit literally atop the viscous wealth that sustains them, would have been a bridge too far. Preserving global capitalism (regaining equilibrium) was their default position.

Another example is the current federal budget. Guy Dauncey, in February EcoNews, referenced a Greenpeace Canada analysis of where the proposed federal budget dollars would be spent: 96% towards rebuilding the broken system exactly as it was before the meltdown, more cars, roads, bridges and fossil-fuel burning energy. It's the panicked need of a broken system to put everything back together again as it was before: humpty-dumptyism.

Klein's shock doctrine accounts for some of the expansion of market capitalism across the globe. The humpty-dumpty syndrome, as a loyal cousin, explains the efforts to maintain market capitalism's hegemony whenever and wherever it's threatened. Together they form a nice, neo-liberal family. And together they demonstrate the one-dimensional thinking characteristic of advanced capitalist societies. It's time to dust off your old volumes of Herbert Marcuse.

Source: U Magazine, University of Calgary, Winter, 2009 (Volume 5, Number 1). Articles are titled Policy Powerhouse (pages 18 to 25) and At Work in Africa, page 9. Website is: www.ucalgary.ca/umagazine

Submitted by Brian Mason, a writer and philosopher living in James Bay.

Renoviction Update

by cyann ray

Last month I was "renovicted." The manager told me I could return to my suite after the work was done for a mere 32% rent increase. Since I can't possibly afford to spend 75% of my disability pension on rent, I am forced to leave my home of eight years.

Lots has happened during these past few uncertain weeks. My visit to see the Mayor with fellow renovictees resulted in some mainstream media attention of the loopholes in the Residential Tenancy Act. Tenants are being kicked out of their homes under the pretense that major renos are necessary. Some new flooring and a coat of paint later and rents go up by as much as \$400/mth.

While I seriously doubt that public exposure will stop my landlord's questionable business practices, there is now a "stop work order" sign on one of the basement suites in my building. It seems that Dr. Edward Domovitch has neglected to obtain the necessary permits for any renovations. Not since Oct.'02 has he bothered to go through the proper channels. After 7 years of what I can only assume are illegal rent increases and evictions (under the guise of needing to renovate), somebody did something and I'm glad of that.

Was it the actions of Myk Rhodes? Rhodes received a "renoviction" notice on New Year's Eve. He took it upon himself to not only speak up about this hidden injustice, but to rally together other victims from Domovitch's properties.

When you learn about your rights and speak up, you feel less victimized. When you see an effect (ie: mainstream media coverage; 'stop work order' posted), you feel a little empowered.

The sad reality though is that most of us living in rentals owned by Domovitch, or any other similar landlord, are a little apprehensive. Affordable housing is such a rare commodity here and most folks are just happy to be living indoors. Some would even argue that these types of landlords provide a valuable service. Without dumps (neglected properties) to rent, where would the poor live?

Of course this is absurd. They say that beggars can't be choosers, but is this a legitimate reason to exploit the disadvantaged? I know all too well that sorry feeling of being a lowly victim. It's easy to fall into the mindset that you get what you deserve. It's called a self-fulfilling prophecy. Being treated unfairly can eat away your dignity and inner strength. This is hardly the approach we should be taking with our hard-to-house population. Better to see the potential in each of us and provide the support needed than to create, then maintain a group of troubled souls.

As I write this piece I am surrounded by packed boxes. For 8 years I have called this place home. And for most of his life my dog has chummed around with the dozen or so dogs across the street at the park. It will be a little sad leaving.

It was relatively easy to overlook the pitfalls of living here. I eventually got used to the mice and the sketchy neighbours. The ever-changing management team of untrustworthy incompetents was clearly indicative of an indifferent if not negligent owner. But I created a home here nonetheless.

Dr. Domovitch is well known at the Residential Tenancy Branch through numerous tenant complaints and arbitration. I've heard he usually comes out a winner at these debates, but that has more to do with the R.T.B. favouring landlords than what is actually just. It's another sad reality. Money talks and the poor continue to be exploited.

I will be moving to a bigger, cleaner, safer home with a fair rent and an ethical landlord. But I know I am one of the few who got a lucky break. Part of me feels a little badly leaving other victims behind.

My upstairs neighbour has been complaining to Domovitch and his manager about a leak since Nov.'08. The water pools on her painted, wooden stairs creating an extremely dangerous potential for falling. Will it take a trip to the hospital emergency and a lawsuit to get this landlord to fix the leak??

All I can do now is provide a public service by warning prospective renters to be aware of properties owned by Domovitch. And I urge all victims of unethical landlords to become informed of their rights and speak out. That is the only way change will happen.