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Unbridled spending won't save us this time

Roy Ostling, Oceanside Star
Published: Monday, December 08, 2008

This past week Canadians were treated to a well-rehearsed political performance of the Theatre of the Absurd. While the trained seal acts and pompous antics of our national politicians are always amusing, this latest installment has me laughing so hard I'm still gasping for air.

For those of you unfamiliar with the term Theatre of the Absurd, here's an elegant definition from Answers.com. "A form of drama that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence by employing disjointed, repetitious, and meaningless dialogue, purposeless and confusing situations, and plots that lack realistic or logical development."

First we have our leading man, Stephen Harper, playing his most outraged, patriotic self at the gall of the Liberals and NDP forming a coalition supported by the separatist Bloc Quebecois. The audience recognizes this farcical character reminiscent of Balzac because Harper himself was wooing separatist candidates to win seats for his party in the last federal election.

During his last term, Harper had enlisted and benefited from the support of the Bloc in 14 confidence votes. He had also signed a joint letter with separatist Gilles Duceppe in 2004 to then Governor General Adrienne Clarkson when the Martin Liberals were in trouble. It respectfully reminded her "to consult the opposition leaders and consider all of [her] options."

But wait! In every farce there is a threat to the leading role. Enter stage left, Stéphane Dion. Attacked during the election campaign for his weak and bumbling performance, the audience waits to see if this caricature of a Mountie can save Canada, the damsel tied to the railway tracks, by working with his former enemies to bring political peace to the frontier.

For those worried about which hero among our federal leaders can save us, there's no need for concern. There is a deus-ex-machina or god about to be lowered by stage machinery to resolve the plot: all powerful, unrestrained economic growth. In fact it was Harper's delay in calling for fiscal stimuli to awaken this slumbering miracle worker that led the three opposition parties to unite to topple the Conservatives.

Now some readers may accuse me of hyperbole in ascribing hero or god-like status to the concept of economic growth. But the power of unbridled spending and consumption is such that most political leaders and their economic advisers believe it can lead us out of any wilderness. All we have to do is offer more debt to Mammon and we can escape the surly bonds of common sense and reason.

The same beliefs are applied to Nature. If She rebels against our economic excesses of carbon emissions, erosion, and over-harvesting with floods, hurricanes, droughts, and depleted soils and fisheries, we can simply throw money at her and she will retreat into submission. This we naively believe.


Have we forgotten that, in the 17th century, the world entered the Age of Enlightenment and the stage was set for scientific advancement? The birth of a robust skepticism threw open the curtains and shed the light of reason on the authoritarian and dark world of religious-like superstition. It seems, however, that our politicians and media pundits want to keep us drinking from the well of gullibility forever.

Yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus who can put a six-foot, big screen TV under every tree and he'll put it on his VISA, which has infinite resources. Forget the concept of sustainability or the notion that all our goods ultimately come from one source, the environment: the water, air, land and atmospheric ecosystems that sustain us.

Theatrics has shaped today's discourse around politics, economics and sustainability. We have lost our script, that common language of reason, and our ability to use healthy skepticism to challenge our leaders' and their advisors' misguided notions on how to get our economy on a stable and sustainable footing.



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The common bond that sustains humanity and brings us together is our environment. This environmental envelope has limits that any thinking person can see – limits that we cannot wish, pray, or grow away. Accepting this leads us back to our fundamental values as a culture and a thinking-feeling species.

Thus, we are left with two paths. The first is to accept the limits of the natural world that sustains our very lives and those of future generations, and learn to live sustainably within them. The other option is to continue to grope around in the darkness of economic and cultural myths that threaten the real world we inhabit. As poet Robert Frost wrote, choosing the path less traveled by, could make all the difference.

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