

*Sunday October 28, 2012*

## **Not the best week for common sense**

By Jim Taylor

Autumn must be the silly season – and I’m not even considering the U.S election hysteria when I say that. Last week, I shook my head over some of the news stories that affronted my eyes and ears.

There was, for example, the Italian court that convicted six seismologists of manslaughter for failing to predict when an earthquake would demolish a city.

There was the Canadian member of parliament – from the party that promotes itself as tough on crime -- who awarded the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Medal to two jailed anti-abortion activists, citing their commitment to civil disobedience.

And there was Alberta Premier Alison Redford, echoing Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s rationale for a National Energy Program as her justification for a pipeline carrying Alberta bitumen to the Pacific coast.

I felt as if I had tumbled down Alice in Wonderland’s rabbit hole.

### **Scientific illiteracy**

I hardly know where to start. But since Alice’s rabbit hole led underground, let’s start with the seismologists.

Italy is a seismic crockpot bubbling with volcanoes and earthquakes. Geologically, it’s not part of Europe at all. The continents, like the visible part of an iceberg, are the surface of huge tectonic plates that float like driftwood on currents in the molten mantle below.

One of those plates, moving northwards, smashed Italy into the southern flank of Europe with all the weight of Africa behind it. The Alps are the impact’s crumple zone.

In 2009, an earthquake devastated the Italian city of L’Aquila. After hundreds of tremors, the city asked the seismologists to advise them about the risk of a major earthquake. The scientists analyzed the data, and concluded that there was no immediate danger.

What else could they say? Moving continents are irresistible forces that don’t run according to human schedules.

Indeed, the tremors could be interpreted as a good sign. Some of the pressures building several kilometres underground were being released, rather than accumulating for a single catastrophic rupture.

Just six nights later, that rupture killed 308 people.

Judge Marco Billi sentenced the seismologists to six years in prison for manslaughter.

The *Christian Science Monitor*’s Dan Murphy called Billi’s verdict” a triumph of scientific illiteracy.”

“Rarely since a Catholic inquisition in Rome condemned Galileo Galilei to spend the remainder of his days under house arrest for the heresy of teaching that the Earth revolves around the Sun,” Murphy fulminated, “has an Italian court been so wrong about science.”

I wouldn’t go quite that far. But Billi clearly confuses precision with predictability. Science requires precision; it cannot function on guesswork. But the ability to accurately measure natural phenomena – like earth tremors – does not translate into precision in forecasting when events will happen.

## Civil disobedience

Next, we have a representative of Canada's Conservative Party awarding royal medals to two activists currently in jail. Both have been repeatedly charged and convicted of forcing their way into abortion clinics and harassing staff and patients.

The MP, Maurice Vellacott, praised them for "civil disobedience to further a just cause."

Isn't this the same Conservative party that arrested some 300 protesters for civil disobedience during the G8 summit in Toronto two years ago?

I guess disobedience is a flexible virtue. It's laudable if it agrees with your MP's personal biases; it's criminal if it makes his government look bad.

Surely, to be consistent, Vellacott should also have given a medal to 84-year-old Betty Krawczyk, the granny who has now been arrested eight times, mainly for opposing logging in old-growth forests. Or perhaps to animal activist Paul Watson, whose commitment to his ideals has led to legal action against him in at least five countries. Or to the environmental activists opposing the Northern Gateway pipeline through northern B.C., characterized by cabinet minister Joe Oliver as "radical groups [who] hijack our regulatory system to achieve their ideological agenda [using] funding from foreign special interest groups to undermine Canada's national economic interest."

## Resurrected reasoning

And finally, we had Alberta Premier Alison Redford invoking the spirit of Pierre Elliot Trudeau to defend that same pipeline.

Albertans have never forgiven Trudeau for his 1980 National Energy Program. Alberta was sitting on top of enough petroleum to supply Canada's energy needs for several centuries. Trudeau argued that Alberta had not created those resources. All Canadians should share the benefits of cheap oil, instead of exporting it to more lucrative markets.

"It's not Alberta's oil," he declared, more or less. "It's Canada's oil."

Alberta cried foul. Trudeau lost. Alberta became rich – the only Canadian province with no sales tax – by selling its oil at prices set by OPEC oil kings.

But in an interview with the CBC's Peter Mansbridge, about B.C.'s concerns over the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline that would carry Alberta bitumen to the port of Kitimat, Redford stole Trudeau's reasoning: "It's not B.C.'s coast, it's Canada's coast."

I was sure I could hear Trudeau's ghost cackling sardonically.

As Alice said, the world gets "curiouser and curiouser."

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## YOUR TURN

The letters about last week's column, on the provision of almost exclusively Christian chaplains to serve all faiths in Canada's prisons, broke down into two groups. There were those who saw the cutbacks mainly as government stupidity. And those who argued the practicalities of the situation.

Bonita Garrett in Winnipeg was one of those in the first group: "It's another budget cut aimed at those whose religious views, ideology, and politics differ from the Conservative government. It's beyond unfortunate that many of the budget cuts are aimed at those with little or no voice in society. At the end of this four year mandate, will either an NDP or Liberal government be able to return Canada to the caring country we loved? Putting Canadian resources up for sale, the lack of any serious environmental policies to protect land, sea, air, and 180 species they can't be bothered to put on an endangered list ... the list goes on. It doesn't feel like my Canada."

Jessie Carlson: "The prison population deserves to have their spiritual needs met, we want them to become whole people not misfits of society. If we try to fit them into a single mould, this will continue to make them outside society."

Caroline Davidson saw a cross-border pattern: "I have been reading 'The Assault on Reason' by Al Gore. He talks about the George W. Bush regime. Some of it sounds like the blinders-wearing people in our House of Commons."

Art Gans added his personal experience: "After 34 years as a chaplain in two different armies I know a little about the difficulties of providing multi-faith service. The first thing I learned was that most soldiers didn't care about denomination, they just wanted to see the Padre. The second thing was that as a responsible padre, I had to have an appropriate contact list of other clergy in the area who could provide realistic counsel to those to who needed counsel that was not in my competence to provide. In my experience I have provided help to nearly every religious denomination or faith grouping. And if I couldn't help directly, I made arrangements for an appropriate person who could and arranged for appropriate payments for their time.

"If Toews thinks his new system in going to be cheaper, wait until he gets the bill, not only for non-stipendiary chaplains but for civil rights court suits that result from his stupidity."

Then there was the other side. Brian Ames took a tough line: "I was raised to believe that there is one God. How you reach that God is your business, but when you are convicted and sent to prison you should not have choices, in my opinion. We are far too indulgent with prisoners today. If you are not happy with what is available then say your own prayers in the way you wish."

Steve Roney addressed "the fallacy of the false alternative: either the taxpayer pays for chaplains of all conceivable faiths, or the prisoner doesn't get to practice his religion. After all, here on the outside, the taxpayer does not finance our ministers.

"When you break down the stated religions of the prison population, it is hard to justify the expense of a chaplain for any religion other than Christianity:"

Steve cited figures on the religious affiliations of Canada's prison population, and went on: "How do you equitably distribute 71 chaplains into those percentages? Simple math says 32 Catholics, 16 Protestants, 4 Muslims, 3.5 native religions, 2 Buddhists, 1 each for a few randomly selected smaller communities.

"Having four or two or one minority chaplain to serve the entire prison system is functionally meaningless; a waste of tax money. Which prison do each of the minority chaplains work at? All of them? That's quite a circuit to ride, for one or even four chaplains. And insupportably expensive, if the taxpayer is supposed to foot the bill. But if they do not travel, if they are stationed at any one given prison, inevitably, the majority of their religious community is not served. Perhaps one or two inmates at a given prison are served.

"As a practical matter, therefore, it makes sense that these smaller communities be served if and as needed from the outside on a volunteer basis."

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sundays, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly

because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca).

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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