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Glimmers of a new era for sweatshops

By Jim Taylor

Despite initial impressions, the garment-workers tragedy in Bangladesh may turn out to be a sign of progress.

Don't get me wrong – I don't discount the scale of this tragedy. As I write this column, the official death toll has passed 500; there may be another 200 still unaccounted for. Add a series of other sweatshop disasters in Bangladesh – 112 deaths in a fire last November, for example – and it's tempting to write Bangladesh's \$20 billion garment industry off as a textbook case of greed, corruption, and incompetence.

But the casualties may also mark a turning point in an on-going revolution – the dismantling of a centuries-old social system. In India, it's the caste system. In Bangladesh -- which is Muslim, not Hindu – the social strata are more based on gender and wealth but they are just as real.

Although these social divisions commonly masquerade as religion, they actually a way of ensuring that the people on top stay on top.

Trapped by one's birth

Traditionally, you cannot break out of your birth prison. Born a latrine cleaner, always a latrine cleaner. Born female, always subservient.

To our European Enlightenment sensibilities, this seems like anathema. Humans, we believe, have intrinsic rights, to break free of hereditary bonds, to progress on their own merits.

However, as my father sometimes pointed out, the caste system guaranteed employment. It was, in effect, a closed-shop union. If you belonged to the street sweepers, the leather workers, the silversmiths, you always had work. No outsider could trespass on your turf.

The current controversy about temporary immigrant workers taking Canadian jobs could not happen in a caste system.

The arrival of industry cracked the caste system. New jobs in textile factories, automobile assembly lines, and software development had no caste precedents. Anybody could move into them.

Inevitably, upper caste men tended to own or manage the new industries; the lower castes and women filled the menial jobs.

But they wanted those jobs. Because even at pittance wages, humiliating domination, and appalling working conditions, a factory job was better than sifting shellfish from the mud of a riverbank.

Especially a factory producing goods for western consumers. Because those western companies occasionally required better working conditions. Not because multinational corporations had higher ethics; they needed to placate outraged customers.

Amending the formula

Which is exactly what has now happened with Loblaw's, parent company of the Joe Fresh brand of clothing.

Loblaw's president Galen Weston announced this week that his company will no longer rely on reports from local managers. They will now place their own staff in Asian plants to monitor conditions.

That will put pressure on other garment factories all through the Indian subcontinent.

Years ago, a colleague visited some sweatshops in South Korea. He was appalled. Low ceilinged floors, piled layer on layer, women working long hours in poor light, poor ventilation, elbow to elbow....

Today, South Korea is seen as a model for development. Its cars compete with Japanese, European, and American models. And the sweatshops, I'm told, have moved on, as international pressure raised working standards. To Taiwan, central China, Indonesia. Most recently, to Bangladesh.

Disasters often mark these turning points. *Globe and Mail* columnist Doug Saunders described one such sweatshop fire:

"Inside the garment factory, hundreds of poor women sewed the clothes that filled our shops. The factory's owners had been warned that the place was hazardous; they ignored the warnings. When disaster struck, the death toll was horrendous."

Sound familiar? No, it's not Bangladesh. It's the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Toronto, "in which 146 Jewish and Italian immigrants, many under 18, roasted or plunged to their deaths after the owner of the clothing factory ignored fire-safety warnings and locked workers inside."

Out of tragedy, change

"The Triangle fire," Saunders argued, "is the reason why fire-escape stairs and sprinklers are now ubiquitous; it's also part of the reason why blue-collar wages, working conditions and child-labour laws improved... There's good reason to hope for a similar transformation in Bangladesh – especially if consumers demand high standards from their brands, as they have with considerable success in China."

When we lived in Toronto, 25 years ago, a neighbor worked as buyer for a major Canadian clothing chain. He travelled widely through Asia, selecting the clothing his chain would market the next winter.

He looked three things – style, quality, and price.

Working conditions did not enter the corporate equation.

But today, they do. Consumers occasionally shake off their complacency and demand more from the big brands than low prices. Nike and Adidas get wary about using six-year-old boys to stitch soccer balls together. Joe Fresh and Primark can no longer wash their hands of a collapsed building in Bangladesh. Even the media, chronic lackeys to their advertising revenues, demand answers from corporations.

Something is changing. Maybe not fast enough. Maybe not widely enough. But we are witnesses to, and participants in, a worldwide revolution.

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YOUR TURN

When I wrote last week's column, I felt a bit like a small boy flying a very large kite in a windstorm. I was surprised at how many of you agreed with me, in whole or in part.

Lyle Phillips said, "One line stood out for me – 'Political Parties are the Problem.' I saw the exact same words in an editorial from the Cowichan News Leader. (Good thing it was so recent or I would have forgotten all about it!) I agree with both you and the author of the editorial. Your arguments make perfect sense to me. But I'm not a politician -- thank God."

Isabel Gibson suggested that there might be an intermediate step: "There was a newspaper article this week about the big shift in the power within federal parties when (sometime in the 1970s), the rules changed to require the party

leader to sign the nomination papers for a candidate running for their party. This eliminated the (rare, I believe) situation where two folks both claimed to be, say, the Liberal candidate in a given riding. Oh, the confusion! The unintended consequence, however, was that leaders now had the sole power to prevent a candidate (even an incumbent) from running for their party - so MPs learned pretty quickly to toe the leader's line.

"Maybe we could take it one step at a time - roll back the "leader signs off" rule, and see how far that takes us. If it's not far enough, then we can ban the whole party structure."

Steve Roney agreed with Isabel: "I think the problem could be solved by just one simple reform. We should end the requirement that parliamentary nomination papers be signed by the party leaders. This violates the spirit of the Westminster system, and subverts it in practice. Nomination papers should be signed by the duly constituted local riding association of each party. At present, local candidates must please the leader. With this change, leaders will instead need to maintain the confidence of their local supporters. Which is what the Westminster system envisions."

Bill Peterson agreed with the idea that political parties are a problem. But thinking about the idea forced him to do some research. "Your thought of compelled consensus reminded me of my father's admiration for Mustafa Kamal Atatürk's pressuring the revision and adoption of a new Turkish alphabet. He told me Atatürk confined them till the alphabet was ready. Wikipedia indicates only that he suggested it in spring of 1928 and a Language Commission introduced a new alphabet on November 1, 1928..."

"That also reminded me of various stories of the origin and organization of the Council of Nicea by Constantine. I was led to believe he all but confined them for that event."

Lynette James recalled, "When I was a kid, a well-known politician crossed the floor because he felt he could accomplish more as a member of the ruling party. That was a sad reality. My mother voted for him again in the next election because she believed 'you should vote for the person not the party'. That lesson stuck with me. So I seldom refer to myself as a supporter of any party, but I read the literature, listen to the candidate and follow my conscience. Sometimes my choice gets in and sometimes not. But most important, I am an informed VOTER! The apathy of too many people drives me crazy. It is a right, a privilege, and a duty to vote."

Dale Perkins, as usual, found an issue behind the issues: "I think what you are bemoaning is the wide-spread disease of cynicism. I think more and more people have come to think that cynicism is OK (just like the increasing number of people who definitely feel that religion practiced by all institutional operations is dumb and indefensible, and no self-respecting person should have anything to do with it).

"The real contest, I feel, is between total and complete belief in individualism and leaving it to whatever the marketplace dictates, and those who cling tenaciously to some forms of collective identity and influence in our lives. It used to be described as capitalism vs socialism. However, those words are irrelevant now, so we've gravitated simply to trusting that corporate capitalism will solve whatever ails us..."

"The real issue is -- is reform possible? Can reform happen inside political parties? Or do we give up on these blunt instruments we've developed in this warped form of democracy?

"I've chosen to be a reformer -- a very critical one mind you. And working inside an existing political party."

Eduard Hiebert actually sent this as a response to my Wednesday column, *Soft Edges*. But it seemed to fit here: "For most human activity, our daily walk of ways democratic precedes talk. The evolutionary advances in democracy, as a means to bridle ongoing acts that are hostile to democracy, does require talk, at least among the few, of new ways before we the man can walk new ways."

Eduard is a proponent of referential ballots, and commented further, "When I passed on to you my observation of the power 1-2-3 ballot to mitigate the dysfunctionality of the single-mark ballot, I had hoped you would have seen me as the Dutch boy holding his finger in a leaking dike, except I was holding my finger in a very leaky electoral system where many peoples votes are leaked away as if they do not count. I was hoping you too would not only sound the alarm bells, but model how we can walk the talk of democratic self-rule in contrast to the walk of being other- ruled."

Cliff Boldt sent along his favourite quotation: "Apathy is the glove into which Evil slips its hand."

He went on, "Your column summarized a lot of what I am hearing and feeling. As a lifelong political junkie, I am finding this campaign boring. No one has caught my attention with a vision of what could be. We are

getting fed a lot of pabulum with platitudes. A lot of style is being put forward with an attempt to brand it as substance -- Kim Campbell was right about that. How did we get to this point? Easy to blame individuals and parties, but at what point did we citizens start to accept that?"

Diane Robinson confessed to feeling "increasingly jaded" about politics.

"In the recent Regina municipal election, a young man (30's) was elected to council. While I don't know for sure, I believe it was because he has worked extensively with the homeless/disadvantaged/marginalized of this city. It's more than obvious that he is a voice crying in the wilderness, for he is serving on a council that is far more interested in stadiums, condos and office towers than in justice and inclusion for every citizen of this city.

"While I hope and pray that he will hold on to the passions and beliefs that drove him into municipal politics, I fear that he will become discouraged as his voice is continually drowned out by the myriad voices driven by economic greed and social indifference (also called 'progress').

"No doubt people are drawn to politics for various reasons. Some, like the young man I've mentioned, are drawn to politics because they see it as a vehicle for much-needed societal change. Others, like the BC politician you mention, are/were drawn to politics for other reasons.

"While I hope that at least some who are drawn into the political arena will remain immune to being corrupted by power, I am sadly aware of the many examples in our world (past and present) of those who've been/are absolutely corrupted by absolute political power."

Gus Richardson wrote, "Pity there isn't an academy award for metaphors, cause you hit the jackpot with the Gordon Campbell punchbowl metaphor."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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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

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. 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

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.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 to get onto her mailing list.
