

Sunday February 23, 2014

“Culture of entitlement” strikes again

By Jim Taylor

I can't remember what I was doing when I heard that the Department of National Defence had paid \$72,225.86 to move retired Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie into his new home in Ottawa.

But I can clearly remember my reaction. “Seventy-two thousand?” I roared in disbelief.

My sense of outrage increased when I heard that the move was not across the country, or back to Canada from some overseas location – prior to his retirement, Leslie had commanded Canadian forces in Afghanistan -- but from one Ottawa home to another just four minutes' drive away.

Apparently I wasn't the only one upset. When Leslie also turned out to be a possible Liberal candidate in the next federal election, the Conservative Party blasted him for “inappropriate moving expenses.”

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau retaliated by calling the Conservative charges “a pure partisan attack.”

Of course it was – the Conservatives, still smarting over questionable housing expenses claimed by members of the Senate, were delighted to demonstrate that Liberal pinkies were also far from pure.

But treating the issue as a political football misses the main point.

Just “following the rules”

According to the Canadian Press news agency, when Leslie was challenged about his moving expenses, he defended them by saying he was entitled to make the claim. He simply accepted a standard benefit, he said, available to any veteran with 20 or more years of service that allows veterans a final move to anywhere in Canada.

That his move was only a short distance didn't matter, Leslie indicated – he was entitled to certain amounts, laid out in DND policies.

There's the problem – the sense of entitlement.

Senators Mike Duffy, Pamela Wallin, Patrick Brazeau, and Mac Harg all felt entitled to their housing allowances. Cabinet minister Fran Oda thought she was entitled to a \$16 glass of orange juice in London. Senator Scott Tannas of Alberta billed \$12,000 for an executive class return flight to Ottawa for himself and his wife; Senator Don Meredith spent \$1,400 for a return flight from Ottawa to Toronto.

“We travel according to the plan that is given to us,” Meredith told the CBC.

The Toronto *Star* dubbed them the “just following the rules” gang.

Rules, unfortunately, tend to encourage these apparently exorbitant expense claims. They try to cover every eventuality, to make sure no one abuses the system. But what starts as a maximum allowable soon becomes the norm. If you don't ask for everything you're entitled to, you mess up the system.

When the CBC moved me from Vancouver to Prince Rupert, 50 years ago, I had no difficulty getting reimbursed for moving expenses. My only difficulty was convincing the CBC's regional administration that I didn't need the full amount I was entitled to.

If I had claimed everything I was entitled to, the cheque would have gone through without question. As, apparently, it did for Andrew Leslie.

What's legitimate?

Andrew Leslie did it according to the book. He said he simply availed himself of an existing agreement and placed himself in the hands of a third party, never seeing the bill for his move.

Now Minister of National Defence Rob Nicholson has told CTV News that he will ask his department to examine "how an in-city move could possibly total over \$72,000."

It does seem exorbitant. CTV and Global News obtained documents about the moves of 20 former generals. Thirteen moved within a city, like Leslie; seven others moved to areas just outside it. Yet half of those moves cost \$25,000 or less.

Even moving Gen. Daniel Ménard all the way to the United Arab Emirates, after his court martial for having sex with a subordinate, cost only \$40,000.

Explanations of Leslie's bill tend to fall on deaf ears. The *Star's* Tim Harper, for example, says that real estate commissions on the two houses would have swallowed most of the \$72,000. Leslie's house in the ritzy Rockcliffe neighbourhood in Ottawa was listed for over one million dollars. Depending on the agent's rate, the commission on that sale alone could be up to \$70,000.

But do real estate commissions count as a moving expense? I can only say, not in my experience. Especially not if Leslie pocketed a significant tax-free capital gain from the sale of his residence.

No one's entitled to anything

Through no fault of his own, Andrew Leslie has become a symbol of what's sometimes called "the culture of entitlement."

I take a somewhat extreme view on entitlement -- no one is entitled to anything. No matter whether you're the CEO of an international corporation or a worm in a compost pile. Life favours some, and hurts others. That's just how it is. No one is entitled to long life, to health, to happiness. No one is entitled to make a profit. No one is entitled to fame or fortune.

You do what you do because it's worth doing. If that produces benefits, for yourself or for others, so much the better. But if it doesn't, too bad. Don't complain that you didn't get all that you were entitled to.

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YOUR TURN

My editing colleague James Harbeck disagreed with my prescription for changing the Winter Olympics, last Sunday: "My wife -- a figure skater -- strongly dislikes the presence of curling at the Olympics. There's nothing higher, faster, stronger about it, she protests! I point out in reply that there is only one sport at the winter Olympics that is not susceptible to doping or corrupt judging. Yes: it's curling.

"She loves ice dancing but is iffy about its value as an Olympic sport. But she would never say that figure skating should be booted from the games. They're far more Olympian than curling. Do you protest that those style points aren't athletic? It's not just that jumping a triple is much harder than jumping a double; it's that jumping it well -- stylishly -- is harder than jumping it sloppily, even if you can't use a tape measure to evaluate them."

James added an interesting parallel: "[My wife] loves freestyle aerobics: for her they're the apotheosis of higher, faster, stronger. Do you object that the value of a full-double-full-double relies too much on style points? Or we just shouldn't count them at all? That is just an argument that what we haven't figured out how to measure shouldn't

be treated as real. It's also the argument used by secular humanists. It's the argument used by people who deny the existence of love."

Canadians athletes, James suggested, "have focused on breaking free from the old mental limitations, from thinking things are real only if we can comprehend them with our limited means. Those newer sports in turn are developing more sophisticated means of evaluating such differences. And at the same time [they are] recognizing that things can still be real even if a measuring tape cannot comprehend them."

John Clinton also picked up the contentious issue of scoring: "OK, Jim.... You touched a nerve (or two or three) again.

"From age 5 our son played the piano exceptionally well. Through the years he has been in several significant competitions and won his share of prizes. Judging was always very, very subjective. I mean -- after you've heard six Mozart Sonatas & a dozen Chopin Etudes, how do you differentiate good from better and best?

"When he was age 18, he made the semi-finals of an important competition & didn't advance to the finals. He was very disappointed. One of the judges came to him and said (on the side): "Two of us wanted to put you in the finals but others said 'He's young. His time will come.'

"Life isn't fair -- but that was a hard lesson for him to learn that way. He's now age 50. That's only one of many 'life lessons' he has learned. I think he's a better man for it. And he can still dazzle an audience with his piano playing."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "I agree entirely, but the big business that is sport will be a hard nut to crack."

Sandra Sellars challenged my comparison of soldiers and athletes: "But that didn't mean I had to support their war."

"I don't believe that was THEIR war," Sandra wrote. "It was a war that the Canadian government decided to support for whatever reasons ...Not that I supported this war or any war but that it becomes OUR war, our history etc., when our government makes the decision. Many of our soldiers went to Afghanistan feeling like it wasn't their war either but they went because that was what was asked of them."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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

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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>](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.
