

Sunday October 5, 2014

More people demand more services

By Jim Taylor

Three candidates running for Kelowna city council have formed a party they call Taxpayers First. Their platform is simple – no new taxes for the next four years.

The three hopeful councillors believe Kelowna taxpayers are being ripped off by inflated salaries for city staff and by extravagant projects. They cite an \$800,000 biffy in a city park, a \$2.2 million office building for the city dump, and a \$48 million planned headquarters for the local police force.

They say it's time to hold the line on taxes. Many seem to sympathize.

I think they may be missing a larger picture.

No economies of scale

Years ago, I interviewed Prince Rupert's legendary mayor Pete Lester. At the time, Prince Rupert expected a boom. A new pulp mill had opened. Housing developments were underway. An industrial shipping terminal was planned.

Some believed these developments would spread city expenses over a bigger tax base, enabling taxes to hold steady, or even drop.

Pete Lester disagreed. Despite lacking any formal training in civic management, he was elected and re-elected 17 times, over 36 years. Eventually, he received the Order of BC for his service to his community.

"It won't happen," Lester said about hopes for a tax bonanza. "The more people you get, the more services they expect. Taxes always go up as you get bigger."

A small community, he explained, may be satisfied with gravel roads. But as the population rises they will want paved roads. With curbs. With storm sewers instead of ditches. With streetlights and sidewalks for pedestrians.

As the population rises, Lester continued, so will crime. So people will demand more police services. Regulations to protect property values. Museums, and libraries, and recreational facilities.

An inevitable progression

Sociologist Jared Diamond, in his most recent book *The World Until Yesterday*, confirmed Pete Lester's analysis. Diamond's two previous bestsellers, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *Collapse*, explained why European and central Asian nations dominated the world in a way that African or South American nations did not, and why many prosperous nations crashed almost overnight.

In *The World Until Yesterday*, Diamond deals with the growth of human groupings from "bands" (essentially extended families, with fewer than 100 members) to "states" – anything over about 10,000 people (which would include cities such as Kelowna).

In a "band," everyone knows everyone. Decisions are made collectively, face to face, by the whole community. Some people may have more influence than others, but there are no elected leaders.

At the band level, Diamond writes, abstract issues of right and wrong matter less than finding some kind of compromise that allows a group to continue to function. "Disputes have to be settled in ways that restore relationships, or at least make them tolerable, because you're going to be living near that person for the rest of your life."

As these social groups grow larger, their structure changes. Members may still speak the same language, share some ancestral history, and follow the same customs.

But it's hard to hold face-to-face meetings with 1,000 people. Inevitably, the group develops leaders – even if, as Diamond notes, "They lead by their powers of persuasion and personality rather than by recognized authority."

Social infrastructure

Eventually, formal leadership becomes necessary. Someone has to make the policy decisions based on abstract principles of justice. And that leader needs subordinates to carry out those decisions. They become an administrative staff, maintaining peace and order, and gathering resources from people in productive occupations to feed those in administrative positions.

In other words, police and tax collectors.

In Diamond's largest social grouping, any community that exceeds 10,000 people, most of the people are strangers to each other. They may not share cultural backgrounds. They may not even speak the same language.

To live and work together, they need “police, laws, and codes of morality to ensure that the inevitable constant contacts between strangers do not routinely explode into fights.”

“Large populations,” says Diamond, “can’t function without leaders who make the decisions, executives who carry out the decisions, and bureaucrats who administer the decisions and laws.”

Do you see the progression? Simply by growing larger, any group evolves specialized tasks and functions. Which need support by the rest of the people.

Support used to come from a share of a farmer’s produce. Or from unpaid services to the state.

Today, in a monetary economy, support comes through taxes.

Tax freeze, growth freeze

Kelowna may indeed be wasting some of its tax revenues on extravagant projects or excessive salaries, as Taxpayers First claims. But short-term economies won’t alter the fact that a long-term freeze on taxes also means a freeze on growth.

Okay, if that’s what people want. But every political platform I’ve seen also presupposes growth – of people, of services, of industries.

The bigger the social entity, as Pete Lester said, the more taxes you have to collect.

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YOUR TURN

Last week’s column talked about our thoughtless use of outdated concepts in songs and hymns. Christa Bedwin found herself repulsed by the insensitivity of the students – and others -- and asked to be removed from the mailing list for Sharp Edges: “It’s too much horribleness for my state of mind.”

Isabel Gibson took a sardonic tone: “Of course the words don’t matter. That, of course, is why we don’t have courts to rule on the application/interpretation of laws written in words, or constitutions written in words. It’s why we don’t mutter under our breath when instructions or directions mislead us. It’s why

we don't have to speak words to marry someone, or why we don't think less well of those who can't apologize meaningfully. It's why we don't thrill to oratory."

Then she reverted to more serious consideration: "If the students had engaged in the actions they were singing about (some of them illegal), that undeniably would have been a lot worse, but it sure doesn't excuse the singing. We can deplore, even condemn, the students' behaviour without agreeing on what the universities should be doing about it. The students aren't children: they're free to be as rude as any other adult or group of adults in our society, I'd say.

"And if universities start expelling people for offensive thinking, where will that end, I wonder?"

Dale Perkins recalled the lyrics for the Ethiopian relief campaign in the 1990s -- "Words are not enough," among the many songs about the famine in Africa. He also thought he remembered "a Biblical reference about words never coming back void but accomplishing that for which they were purposed (or something like that).

"Words are powerful, and can be used both ways. I know in this country we are super-sensitive to racial slurs and other innuendos, especially coming from celebrities and politicians. So it is really a continuous call for each of us -- deciding which words say what we want said, and heard by the people we want to hear them. No formula or laws can regulate that."

James Farris recalled an event shortly after World War II: "Your discussion reminded me of the great shock reported by a fellow theological student from Bonn Germany when he visited a large Edinburgh church, where the people stood up and fervently sang the militant-sounding hymn 'Zion's King shall reign victorious', to the tune Austria by Franz Joseph Haydn. The date was 1951. Military occupation prevailed in his home territory and for six years had forbidden use of the words or sounds of the German national anthem, 'Deutschland uber alles' sung to Haydn's music. Clearly the occupiers feared that music reflecting patriotic or religious sentiment might not support a disconnect with Nazi aggrandizement."

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.

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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.

Other sources worth pursuing:

- 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.
