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*Sunday August 31, 2014*

## **One time when I hope I am wrong**

By Jim Taylor

As I write this column Thursday night, I still don't know if B.C. schools will open next week. At the last minute, education minister Peter Fassbender asked teachers to resume negotiations, provided they set aside 12 years of grievances. Teachers responded that those grievances – over class sizes, class composition, and staffing – were the reason for the strike. Or the lockout. Even the terms used reflect one's bias.

And on this issue, I am not unbiased.

My daughter has three university degrees. She ran her own consulting business successfully for 20 years. Then she adopted an Ethiopian orphan with emotional problems. We know little of his life before adoption. He may have been one year old; he may have been two. He may have been abused, verbally or physically; he may have suffered permanent brain damage.

To look after her son, my daughter had to close her business and move to another city. She can no longer work full-time. Because of his tendency to react to almost any resistance with violence, the school won't let him ride the school bus; she has to deliver him to school, and pick him up after school.

The only job that fits that schedule is a four-hour shift at a fast-food outlet. At \$10 an hour.

B.C. finance minister Mike de Jong promised a subsidy of \$40 per day to parents of children under 13, if school doesn't resume next week. That seems generous, although a CBC interview last week implied there may be conditions.

In any case, the subsidy won't be paid until October.

So my daughter will gain the \$40 a day subsidy. And lose her \$40 a day pay. Because no day care will accept her son.

## **First nail in the coffin?**

Having just one of him in a classroom would tax any teacher's ability to teach the rest of the pupils. But according to figures I've seen, 25 per cent of all elementary school classes in the province have four or more special-needs children.

I'll repeat that, just in case you missed it -- one quarter of all elementary classrooms in B.C. have four or more special-needs children.

Since 2001, the provincial government has eliminated almost 1500 specialist positions. Of those, 815 – more than half -- were special education teachers.

My grandson is getting screwed.

Indeed, the whole public education system is getting screwed.

\$40 a day comes to a little over \$800 most months. Which isn't far below the fees charged by some private schools. Which will probably encourage some families to move their children out of the public system entirely.

Perhaps that's what the provincial government wants. They cover only half the costs of education at private schools. For some schools, even less.

The \$40 payout feels like a first tentative move towards vouchers for a privatized education system.

## A broken system

Perhaps I'm paranoid, but I think the government has a hidden agenda – to destroy the B.C. Teacher's Federation. If one government can bring in a teachers' union, another can get rid of it.

Bill Tieleman, acerbic columnist for *Tyee* magazine, wrote that "For Premier Christy Clark, the B.C. Teachers' Federation has become Moby Dick, the object of hatred to be pursued to the ends of the earth. Clark has become Captain Ahab, driven mad in her desire to destroy the union version of the white whale."

I might feel the same, if I were her. Because the BCTF is a formidable adversary. It wants more control over the education system, and thus over Clark's budgets. It has more than 40,000 members, all professionals, all well educated, literate, and highly articulate. They're respected in their communities.

And they are highly motivated. Because they're fighting a bargaining system that's clearly broken.

The provincial government sets the budgets. But it doesn't employ the teachers. School districts do, but they have no say at the bargaining table. Teachers don't actually deal with the government either. They bargain with the B.C. Public School Employers' Association, which exists mainly to represent the government in negotiations. But the BCPSEA has no power to commit the government to anything.

Confused yet?

Before the 2013 election, an independent board worked out an improved process. Right after the election, the whole board was fired.

Education minister Peter Fassbender has declared that government will not legislate the teachers back to work. In that, the government seems to have learned from experience. The last time it legislated teachers back to work, the B.C. Supreme Court twice ruled that the government acted illegally. The government does not want to risk a third rebuke.

I'm afraid that the government is hoping that if the strike/lockout drags on long enough, inconvenienced parents will turn against the teachers, and make it possible to introduce legislation disbanding the BCTF.

Usually, I like being right. This is one time when I hope I am dreadfully wrong.

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## YOUR TURN

Allison Playfair liked my comment in last week's column: "Freedom of religion for all Canadians implies – nay, necessitates – that religion is not paramount over law."

But not because she considers polygamy evil. She went on, "I also agree that it is important for individuals and organizations to lobby for changes to laws according to their beliefs. I wonder though, whether it is any more appropriate for law to legislate against polygamy than it is to legislate against same sex marriage. If two or three of four consenting adults agree to enter into a mutually beneficial living relationship, I do not think it is for me to judge. My concern is whether or not the parties are truly able to enter into the arrangement with full and willing consent. If any are coerced, pressured, or forced, it becomes a matter of public concern. I realize this is often not an easy thing to determine. But that is where legislation is needed -- to ensure protection of minors or those held within an inequitable power structure."

Isabel Gibson also had some doubts about the illegality of polygamy: "What if I believe that marriage is not a matter for the state but only a spiritual matter? Then I must either campaign politically to change/eliminate civil laws regulating marriage, challenge the laws in court, or simply flout them in a form of civil disobedience.

"At Bountiful, we've had years of the 3rd option, and are now moving to the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

"Whatever we think of Blackmore and Oler (and they don't score so well in this household), there is ample

shame here to go around. When a society will not enforce its laws, it deserves whatever it gets as a result. Regrettably, it is the weakest among us who suffer from the result.”

Steve Roney disputed my reasoning “Your stance is that one has freedom of religion only to the point of not breaking any laws. But this is no freedom of religion whatsoever. Everyone has that same right automatically, on any basis they choose, or on no basis: everyone can do whatever they want so long as they break no laws.

“Freedom of religion means that religion trumps law, or it means nothing at all. Note the wording of the US First Amendment: ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’ It is a restriction on what laws are permissible, not a restriction on what religious practices are permissible.

“Otherwise, it would be permissible to simply outlaw the performance of Catholic masses, for example, or the ordination of Jewish rabbis. And this would still be ‘freedom of religion.’”

Laurina Tallman also cited law as the basis for religious freedom: “Religion is paramount in our law. You fail to acknowledge that the values in our laws stem primarily from a very, very long tradition of Christianity that has been self-correcting to some extent over the centuries. Not that our laws are perfectly Christian, but that's where most of the good ideas came from and they have been argued over and ameliorated primarily by Christians and persons who values were steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore, the majority of Canadians are Christians who tend to support that system with their values.

“You can see clearly what happens in countries where different religions are paramount in their laws. Indeed, we have organized a country so tolerant of diversity that the futures you speculate upon could happen.

“So, freedom of religion is a good thing as long as your values are approximately Christian. Right?

“Conscience *does* have to take priority over existing laws. In this country, at least, we acknowledge the right or the need for ‘civil disobedience.’ In fact, such moral stands by individuals have been a force in the changes to some of our laws. Jesus acted in conscience to break Jewish laws, even though it got him killed. Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany is another such person who comes to mind, together with a long list of martyrs.

“I certainly acknowledge the existence of other religions. But I do not consider all religions to be of equal quality or value.”

Sam Strauss wrote, “As usual, dead on.”

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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...

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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](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, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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