

# HEARTS & MINDS

A Newsletter by Members of the Parkdale-High Park NDP

Issue 1

Feb 2009

## Federal budget and Coalition failure

Thomas Mulcair, MP



Stephen Harper has once again found a friend and ally in the leader of the “Official Opposition”. Stephane Dion’s leadership saw to the passing of 43 Conservative confidence motions in the House of Commons. It appears that

Michael Ignatieff is going to follow his predecessor’s lead. He looks into the camera and addresses the people of Canada and explains how this budget doesn’t meet the needs of the country, but that he’ll support it anyway. He has abdicated the moral authority of his party to call itself the official opposition. He has absolved Stephen Harper of his responsibility to keep his word. He has offered the confidence of the 62 percent of Canadians who didn’t vote Conservative, to a leader who brought into law fixed dates for elections and then broke the law because it served his purposes to do so. (Cont’d on p. 2)

## Gaza: Just when peace was about to break out . . .

J.A. MacNeil

As I began this piece on January 19, there was a tenuous ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. Significantly, both Israel’s and Hamas’s ceasefires were unilateral, indicating that neither party intended its ceasefire to be interpreted as a negotiated commitment to the other party.

Israel launched air and missile strikes across Gaza on December 27, 2008. According to the BBC, most of the 225 people killed on the first day were Hamas policemen, but some women and children were also victims. (Cont’d on p. 14)

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The articles contained within represent the views of each author, not necessarily those of either the riding association executive or any other NDP body

## Editor's Intro

### Launch of "Hearts & Minds"

At the November 2008 meeting of the Parkdale-High Park NDP riding executive, one of the exec members proposed the launch of a new newsletter to perform the following functions:

- share information, analysis and reflection of our members on key Canadian and international issues
- promote awareness and debate about NDP policies and the experiences in other socialist or social democratic jurisdictions
- provide links to other sources of information

Members enthusiastically took up the task. We quickly realized that many New Democrats are willing to share their experiences and insights on issues, and that we would not lack for material.

We decided at the outset that the opinions expressed in the articles do not necessarily have to reflect current NDP policy.

If you're interested in commenting on something in this issue of Hearts & Minds, or contributing to a future issue, please contact:

[editorheartsandminds@gmail.com](mailto:editorheartsandminds@gmail.com)

## Federal budget and Coalition failure

He seems to believe that a government that claimed that the economy was strong at the beginning of December has a steady hand on the finances of the nation.

The NDP does not believe that Mr. Harper's right-wing agenda is in the best interest of the country or its citizens. We see a leader who can promise new money for infrastructure, but still hasn't delivered infrastructure funds promised to big-city mayors in 2007, as unfit to lead.

Our party entered into a coalition agreement with the two other opposition parties in the spirit of cooperation, recognizing that the needs of the country could never be met by a party which demonstrably places the interests of oil companies and banks above the needs of our elderly, our homeless, our skilled workers and our bright young minds. The coalition partners were willing to put a little water in their wine if it would lead to a more promising future for our country's children.

Mr. Ignatieff can't be counted on to

oppose Mr. Harper.

This budget fails Ignatieff's own litmus test of protecting the vulnerable, safeguarding the jobs of today, and creating the jobs of tomorrow.

- There's \$60 in corporate tax cuts for every \$1 to unemployed workers.
- Not one single additional unemployed worker was made eligible for EI.
- Harper's infrastructure program won't work because it requires co-payments by other levels of government — and they're broke.
- It attacks pay equity for women.
- It fails to build desperately needed social housing for low-income Canadians
- It fails to create childcare spaces for working families.
- It makes post-secondary education less accessible for our best and brightest.

We're reaching out to hundreds of thousands of disappointed Canadians who voted for Mr. Ignatieff's party to replace Mr. Harper: you can count on us.

## Budget 2009: Billions in new housing spending, but not for those who need it the most

(Editor's note: The following is part of the Wellesley Institute's analysis of the federal budget's housing spending. Michael Shapcott was a candidate for the NDP in the 2004 and 2006 federal elections in Toronto-Centre.)

Michael Shapcott

Billions in new housing dollars, but who really benefits?

Federal budget 2009 promises to deliver billions upon billions of dollars over the next two years in new housing investments – the single biggest amount of new housing

spending in more than two decades. This is a solid victory for housing advocates, who created a powerful national campaign to convince the federal government to include housing in their economic stimulus plans. But most of the new dollars will flow quickly to people who already own their home and want to re-pave their driveway, or cottagers who want to add a new sun deck. The hundreds of thousands who will experience homelessness this year won't get a single penny in desperately needed

new programs and services; and the three million Canadian households who are precariously housed (a modern-day record) will have to wait to see if the much smaller dollars being offered to them will actually make it through a complicated set of federal-provincial-territorial negotiations including a cost-sharing requirement.

For the full article, see: <http://wellesleyinstitute.com/fed-budget-2009-billions-new-housing-spending-not-those-who-need-it-most>

# Decline of Social Assistance in McGuinty's Ontario

Cheri DiNovo, MPP



In 2003, Dalton McGuinty and the Liberal Party were elected promising change in the way government treated the most vulnerable citizens in Ontario. After eight years of Conservative reductions in social assistance, coupled with vilification of social assistance recipients, the Liberals promised a new era of progressive reform. Despite making these promises in 2003, most of the commitments have been abandoned or adopted as half-measures. By 2004, for instance, the Liberals abandoned their commitment to reduce university tuition and bring in a new low-cost child-care program.

It has been in the area of poverty reduction, however, that the Liberals have been most notably absent. Despite launching their much-heralded anti-poverty plan in late 2008, people on social assistance, especially women with children, are doing even worse under the Liberals than when the Harris Conservatives were in power.

In 2007, the National Council of Welfare released its much-anticipated review of welfare rates in Canada. The

Council measured welfare recipients in four categories, examining 1) a single employable recipient, 2) a person with a disability, 3) a lone parent with one child, and 4) a couple with two children.

According to the Council, between 1992 and 2007, a lone parent's welfare income declined by almost \$5,500 (in 2008 dollars, after inflation is taken into account), while a couple with two children lost almost \$8,150.

In all four categories, the lowest level of social assistance rates occurred between 2003 and 2007, while the McGuinty Liberals were in power. In 2003, a couple with two children received \$20,147 in social assistance, which only increased to \$21,058 (5.1 percent more) in 2007.

The lowest level of social assistance for a single parent was in 2005, when such families received a measly \$15,064.

Shockingly, for single recipients and for people with disabilities, the lowest welfare rates in the past twenty years were those of 2007, when inflation is taken into account. For those recipients, social assistance rates were well below the poverty line, ranging from \$7,204 for a single person without disabilities to a paltry \$12,382 for people with disabilities.

Under the McGuinty Liberals, it seems, the promise of progressive reform has been a myth for the most vulnerable citizens in Ontario. How many other promises have been abandoned?

## A snapshot of Canada: Increasing social inequality and declining social spending

### Actual social spending and supports:

Among all 30 OECD countries in terms of total social spending, Canada ranks 25th. Only the United States, Ireland, Turkey, Mexico and Korea (in that order) spend less on social services, health care, income support programs and pension programs than Canada, as of 2004.

Canada ranks 11th among all 30 OECD countries on public health care spending as percentage of GDP.

Out of the 28 OECD countries where data exist, Canada ranks 22nd for levels of public unemployment coverage.

Out of the 21 OECD countries where data exist, Canada ranks 13th in terms of minimum wage levels relative to median income.

Canada ranks 16th out of 23 OECD countries with respect to out-of-pocket child care expenses.

### Poverty and income inequality:

As of 2000, Canada had slipped to 14th among OECD countries for the general poverty rate and child poverty rate—as of 2005 one in 10 Canadians lives in poverty and one in six Canadian children lives in poverty.

As of 2000, Canada had also slipped to 14th among OECD countries for measure of equitable income distribution (GINI coefficient).

Among 21 OECD countries, Canada now has the 5th highest gap in wages between men and women who are employed full-time in similar positions.

Source: Building a healthy economy: More than just banks and stocks, Scott Wolfe, Wellesley Institute:  
<http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/files/scottwolfefinal.pdf>

### Tales of a Yellow Bike – Free public screening

7 pm - Friday, March 27, The Revue Cinema (Roncesvalles and Howard Park)

*"This beautiful film will make you want to pedal your bike home"*

With director Tina Hahn in attendance Sponsored by Cheri DiNovo, MPP

# Stimulating minds is critical for stimulating an economy

The Veterans' Charter showed us the way.

Wendy Cuthbertson

There were great fears throughout the Second World War that it would be followed by a return to the Great Depression, as one million men and women in Canada's armed forces returned to civilian life and the armaments industry no longer needed the hundreds of thousands it employed.

The Canadian government brought in the Veterans' Charter — Canada's was the most generous of all the Allied countries — which was a stimulus measure that paid for the higher education of veterans, with full tuition support and a living allowance.

The response of returning veterans to this opportunity was enthusiastic. According to Veterans Affairs Canada, by March 31, 1951, as many as 80,110 veterans had benefited from vocational training and 53,788 had been supported in their university studies. For example, during the 1947-48 academic year, 49 percent of the University of Toronto's students were war veterans, and even in 1949-50, veterans still accounted for 21 percent of all university students.

A multitude of engineers, architects, metallurgists, chemists, physicists, doctors, and educators — many of whom were working class and who, before the Veterans' Charter, had had no hope of higher education — streamed into our economy and helped create the longest period of deep

economic expansion and the most generalised prosperity in history.

Today, we are looking a deep recession in the face. We need to equip a new generation with the skills and knowledge they will need to build a new economy, just as the veterans did a half-century ago.

The experience of the Veterans' Charter tells us that we once knew how to do this as a society — namely, invest generously in our universities and our potential students. This is the way to long-term prosperity, an increasing concern as every day brings us more and more bad economic news.

However, instead of being afforded the best quality education we can muster for them, Ontario students are coping with larger classes, less time with faculty, a deteriorated physical environment, high tuition fees, and skyrocketing personal debt.

No surprise, with Ontario ranking dead last in Canada for per capita funding of universities.

Economists agree that deficits are essential in a recession, and governments around the globe have announced plans to boost spending significantly. The Canadian economy needs an effective stimulus, and the Ontario government must do its part.

Our universities can be important players in any such stimulus.

History tells us enrolments will increase during a recession, as the young stay in school longer and work-

force veterans return for retraining. A good share of government stimulus spending would allow universities to hire thousands of eager young academics, who could prepare thousands of young people for a new economy, young people who would otherwise have to compete for non-existent jobs.

Thus, Ontario universities can relieve unemployment at the same time as they help produce the skilled knowledge workers the economy demands. Capital projects on campuses across the province would also create jobs.

Many young people, with parental savings evaporating and credit harder to obtain, cannot afford to attend. Older adults who could also benefit from a first or a second post-secondary diploma find tuition fees too high and student aid too miserly — especially for those with family responsibilities — and are hesitant to assume greater debt loads. Tuition is now equivalent to 70 percent of the province's operating grants to universities. The comparable figure for the rest of Canada is 37 percent. The government must extend generous aid to students, just as it did in the 1940s.

That was a time when Canadian politicians understood the value of higher education, not just to individuals but to our society and our economy, too. The Veterans' Charter showed that stimulating minds stimulates an economy.

## Tories slash university research funding; student debt tops \$13 billion

- The federal budget proposes \$148 million in cuts to research councils.
- It proposes nothing to alleviate student debt. Student debt under the Canadian Student Loan programme hit the \$13 billion mark in January. This does not include the approximately \$5 billion in provincial student loan debt.

# Federal budget betrays the unemployed

Peggy Nash



Anyone who owns a car must pay car insurance. This is to protect us in the event of an accident or theft. But imagine a system where even though you paid the premiums, only about 40 percent of drivers would be covered when they needed insurance, and this was dependent on where they lived. So if the disaster of an accident struck, most people would be left on their own with no protection.

Such is the current state of our Employment Insurance programme.

The best lifeline during a downturn is the Employment Insurance programme, which pays benefits to laid-off workers. We all pay into it and when we are laid off, in principle, EI benefits help us through this difficult period until we can find another job.

The problem today is that most people can't claim any benefits. Those who can get benefits often receive too little per week for too few weeks for EI to be of adequate assistance.

EI eligibility is based on the number of hours worked. Access to EI benefits varies across the country, depending on the level of unemployment in a region. Qualifying hours vary between 420 to 700 hours for regular EI benefits and in some cases 840 to 910 hours. Someone in Toronto who loses their job needs to have worked more hours than a person in Atlantic Canada.

Today, less than 25 percent of those unemployed in Toronto are receiving EI benefits. This difference in qualifying hours based on region and the high number of qualifying hours required prevent most people from getting access to EI benefits.

A fairer measure would be a uniform 360-hour qualifying requirement for all EI benefits. This is supported not only by labour groups but also by many economists and business groups.

There are other problems. Today EI benefits only cover 55 percent of earnings, instead of the previous 66 and 2/3 percent and are capped at \$447 weekly. The average benefit paid out is just \$335. Benefits need to be increased to at least 60 percent of previous earnings using the best 12 weeks. There is also a call to eliminate the two-week "waiting period" for benefits so that laid-off workers can receive income for themselves and their families. Most people live pay cheque to pay cheque and going two weeks without any income is a real hardship.

In addition, current EI rules oblige unemployed people to exhaust any severance pay before they can receive EI benefits. Most laid-off workers will need that severance pay to top up EI benefits just to survive.

As the recession hits more and more working people with layoffs and personal financial crisis, Canadians turned their hopes to the recent federal budget for help. EI is an effective way to stimulate the economy. People who receive EI benefits need the money and they spend it right away. They buy goods and services to help them and their families survive the recession and they help get the economy going again.

Here's what Canadians need to

ensure that a recession doesn't become a calamity for those most affected:

1. uniform 360 hours to qualify for entry-level EI benefits in all regions of Canada

2. increase benefit duration to at least 50 weeks in all regions

3. eliminate the 2-week waiting period

4. provide benefits that are at least 60 percent of normal earnings, based on workers' 12 best weeks, and suspend the rule that forces laid-off people to exhaust severance pay before they can receive EI benefits

5. more flexible, innovative uses of E.I. Work sharing to keep people at work.

Sadly this federal budget from the Conservative Government, backed by the Opposition Liberals, turns its back on the more than one million unemployed Canadians. It has done nothing to give greater access to the most vulnerable unemployed and it does nothing to address regional inequities and other problems in getting access to EI.

The budget does propose extending benefits for an additional five weeks in high unemployment areas, but this change fall far short of what is needed in the global economic crisis we are currently experiencing.

In contrast, the US Congress has twice extended state employment benefits, and a new bill may well extend benefits for laid-off American workers for up to two years.

**Editor's note: The federal NDP critic for EI, Yvon Godin (MP for Acadie-Bathurst), has introduced a number of bills to reform EI. See: <http://yvogodin.ca/en/node/137>**

# Hearts & Minds Index

J.A. MacNeil

- Jan. 14, 2009:** The date Canadian-based telecom giant Nortel filed for bankruptcy protection in the U.S.  
**\$10,063,078:** Nortel CEO and President Mike Zafirovski's total compensation package in 2008  
**US\$ 14,415,900:** General Motors' CEO Rick Wagoner's yearly compensation and options package  
**\$447:** the maximum benefit laid-off workers receive weekly via the Employment Insurance programme  
**\$240 million:** value of the contract given to Navistar to build trucks in Texas for the Canadian military  
**500:** the number of workers Navistar laid off in early January 2009 at its Chatham, Ontario truck plant  
**200:** the number of workers Navistar is planning to lay off in February 2009 at its Chatham plant  
**US \$14.7 billion:** Navistar's 2008 earnings (double its 2003 earnings)  
**US\$ 2,950,000:** Navistar CEO Daniel Ustian's 2006 compensation package  
**251,000:** Number of Canadian workers who will be laid off in the first nine months of 2009 (TD Bank estimate)  
**129,000:** the number of people laid off in Canada in January 2009  
**10,800:** Conference Board estimate of number of Canadian auto sector jobs to be lost in 2009  
**\$2.2 billion:** the amount of provincial and federal taxes contributed by Canadian autoworkers yearly  
**7.5:** the number of jobs that depend on each job at an Ontario auto assembly plant  
**700,000:** number of unionized workers in Ontario  
**12.4 :** percentage of US employees who are unionized  
**28.4:** percentage of Canadian employees who are unionized  
**78.0:** percentage of Swedish employees who are unionized  
**3000:** number of years the Ward Hunt Ice Shelf (the largest ice block in the Arctic) existed intact  
**2000:** the year in which the Ward Hunt Ice Shelf started to crack  
**20:** the percentage by which the Arctic summer polar icecap has shrunk since 1979  
**2012 or 2100:** year in which it is estimated that the Arctic will no longer have any ice in the summer  
**2,000,000:** estimated number of hectares of B.C. pine forest killed by pine beetles in 2002, due to climate change  
**80:** number of years it takes a lodgepole pine tree to mature  
**3:** the number of feet by which sea levels are expected to rise by 2100 on the US coast  
**32:** the number of centimetres by which the sea level in Charlottown, PEI has risen since 1911  
**30-100:** the number of centimetres by which the level of the Great Lakes is expected to rise by 2050  
**90:** the percentage by which the population of the Canadian Ivory Gull has declined in the last two decades  
**\$13 billion:** total debt load of Canadian students under federal Student Loan Programme  
(does not include debt incurred under provincial student aid programmes)  
**Dec. 5, 2008:** the day on which the toll of Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan hit 100  
**Can \$250,000:** the maximum amount of the one-time only lump sum compensation for Canadian soldiers disabled by injuries  
**0:** the amount of monthly disability pension disabled Canadian soldiers can receive  
**~Can \$1,066,300:** the maximum amount of a one-time lump sum disabled British soldiers can receive, *in addition to* monthly financial support  
**1,766 - 2,449:** estimated number of Afghan civilians directly killed by Taliban actions (2001-08)  
**4,800 - 6,873:** estimated number of Afghan civilians directly killed by US-led military actions (2001-08)  
**3:** number of Israeli civilians killed between Dec. 27 2008 and Jan. 18, 2009  
**10:** number of Israeli soldiers killed between Dec. 27 2008 and Jan. 18, 2009  
**1310:** estimated number of Palestinians killed between Dec. 27 2008 and Jan. 17, 2009  
**410:** estimated number of Palestinian children killed during the above period  
**1500:** UNICEF estimate of number of Palestinian children wounded during the above period  
**1,500,000:** the number of people living in Gaza  
**56:** the percentage of Gaza residents who are children  
**120,000:** the number of Jews living in Iraq prior to 1948 (BBC estimate)  
**100 or less:** the number of Jews living in Iraq today (BBC estimate)  
**4700:** estimated number of Palestinians wounded between Dec. 27 2008 and Jan. 13, 2009  
**60:** Israeli military estimates of the number of its air strikes against Gaza on the night of Jan. 14-15  
**18:** Israeli military estimates of the number of rockets fired by Hamas militants on Israel on Jan. 13  
**\$3100:** average credit card debt per Canadian household in mid-2008  
**\$8200:** average credit card debt per US household in mid-2008  
**2.5 billion:** the number of plastic bags used by Ontario consumers per year  
**500 billion:** number of plastic bags consumed globally per year  
**400-1000:** estimated number of years it will take for a plastic bag to decompose

# The importance of “Public”

Gord Perks, City Councillor



Over the two years since I've been elected I've grown more and more interested in the word “public”. It appears constantly in the dialogue about the present and the future of Toronto, but we are so familiar with it that we don't often stop and give it the emphasis and reflection it deserves. Public Transit, Public Library, Public Housing, Public Health, Public Spaces, and Public Utilities – these are just some of the services that our City of Toronto delivers.

Our public transit system (the TTC) carries more passengers than any other system in North America except for New York City and Mexico City. Our Transit City programme will bring higher quality service to parts of the City not currently served by streetcars and subways. This is exactly the kind of investment I fought for in my decade as a transit organizer. By the way, Ward 14 has the highest per capita transit use in the City.

Our Public Library system is the largest of any City in the world, providing a huge range of services. Our

libraries are fast evolving into critical community hubs with an astonishing range of services—everything from computer access to literacy to local arts exhibits to my new favourite, Dial-a-Story. I am proud that I hold my constituency hours and several of my public meetings, including civic engagement work with marginalized communities, in the Parkdale Library.

Toronto Community Housing is the largest provider of public housing in North America. We have recently invested \$75 million in new funds to improve the quality of that housing. Our Affordable Housing Committee has supported several broader social housing system projects. I collaborated with the Parkdale-Activity-Recreation Centre to include Edmund's Place at Queen and Dowling as one of these projects, and consider this to be one of my biggest accomplishments as City Councillor for Ward 14.

We have seen improvements in public spaces in Ward 14 – the new Wabash Fieldhouse was finally completed with help from the Wabash Building Society, members of the community and my office. We worked hard to get significant improvements in eight City Parks in the ward, spearheaded by dedicated park users, parents, and friends who wanted to enrich our gathering places.

Our other public services are just as important. Together these provide the equality of opportunity and the social supports that can make Toronto

a good place to live for everyone who lives here.

It wasn't long ago, though, that these services came under heavy assault from a provincial government that was actively hostile to all things public. In many ways our neighbourhoods and the public services that support them are still recovering. Our sister governments – the public school boards—still don't get the kind of support they received when I was a school kid. Balancing our City budget while maintaining services is still a difficult struggle each year, particularly with the economic challenges we are experiencing.

We have made important moves at the City. I believe the next step lies in a different part of the public domain. It is time for enhancing and revitalizing the part of the public domain we build together – public speech, public engagement, and public service. We need to build a new more inclusive and robust dialogue about the City, Province and Nation we want.

Congratulations to the Parkdale High-Park NDP for helping to build this conversation with this newsletter. I will be reading with interest.

Sincerely,

Gord Perks  
City Councillor  
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## In the next issue of Hearts & Minds

**Cheri DiNovo, MPP:** Tax Rebellion – Challenging the MPAC

**Yvon Godin, MP:** Income support for the unemployed— Canada vs. other countries

**John Richardson:** Venezuela—an experiment in participatory democracy

**Jill Marzetti:** What's behind the NDP surge in Nova Scotia

# Chile – Private Wealth and Public Squalor

John Richmond

**Intro:** In 1973, the US government orchestrated the overthrow of the democratically elected Chilean government of President Salvador Allende. Allende's government consisted of several parties - the Socialist Party, Social Democrats, Communists, and MAPU and enjoyed support from a socialist Christian splinter from the right-wing Christian Democratic Party as well as support from far left group called the MIR. The new President of Chile, General Augusto Pinochet, suspended the Constitution, closed Parliament, banned all political parties, killed 4,000 people, imprisoned 28,000 and forced more than a million people into exile. In 1990, in a transition agreement negotiated with the "help" of the US, Pinochet handed power to a group of mostly civilian, elected politicians. The new, complicated and unfair electoral system, created two political groupings (centre-left and right-wing), both of which promised to continue the right-wing economic policies of the dictatorship in return for the transition to democracy. Excluded from this agreement were the Communist Party, the Humanist Party and The Greens - who went on to found a coalition of their own. John Richmond and his partner (Paula Larrondo, a Chilean-Canadian whose father was in the Allende government) recently returned from three weeks in Chile and John brings us this analysis of a country in crisis.

Chile has the largest per capita defence budget in Latin America—more than US\$3 billion annually. Why a small (pop. 16 million) peaceful country with no major regional or international enemies has such a huge military is one of the many paradoxes of this beautiful and “successful” nation.

With annual growth rates of greater than 5 percent for more than 15 years, Chile is one of the most successful economies in North and South America. And you can't miss the results when you come out of the airport in

the capital, Santiago.

Many parts of downtown Santiago are booming—new, massive, shopping malls, condominium and office towers (some abandoned in mid-construction due to the global economic crisis, however) and private toll-roads full of new SUVs and mini-vans.

Almost everything in Chile is private – including the awful “public” transportation system in Santiago. And herein lies the crux. Following the same economic model as Canada, the US and the UK—only imposed at a faster pace—Chile has built one of the most investor-friendly economic environments in the world. And about 30 percent of the Chilean population is doing well because of it. Very well.

The middle and upper-middle class and the rich in Chile are living the good life—a very good life. With two or three cars, two or three houses (at least one in one of the several well guarded, fully private towns on the pacific coast), servants, fully wired homes, etc., the top 35 percent in Chile could not be doing better. But the bottom 65 percent could not be doing worse.

Chile has the highest level of social and economic inequality in Latin America—and it shows. Outside the gated, guarded, wealthy zones, Chile is a mess. With minimal public services—because taxes are very low—the schools, parks, roads and other public infrastructure as well as many ordinary people's homes (sheet metal roofs, broken windows, some with dirt floors) are as bad as any other Latin American country. And with jobs that pay extremely low wages, most Chileans, coping with international prices for many staple goods, are struggling along in the shadow of the “economic success” of their fellow countrymen

(and foreign investors). The price of gas in Chile, for example, is about the same as in Toronto, while the minimum wage is about \$200 per month. Fifteen percent of workers earn less than the minimum wage.

A recent article by Chilean journalist Juan Jorge Faundes highlights the terrible inequality in Chile: large numbers of “retired” Chileans living on less than \$10 per month from the fully privatized (and broke) Chilean national pension plan; over 50 percent of the population with a lower standard of living than the average Cuban; and less than half the number of physicians per capita that Cuba has (and many of those physicians are working only in the upscale private medical system).

The widespread inequality in Chile has had predictable results: it has one of the highest percentages of its population in prison of any country in the region—over 210 per 100,000, more than twice the percentage imprisoned in neighbouring countries Argentina and Bolivia, and an incredible four times the percentage imprisoned in socialist Venezuela. Crime is widespread—and sometimes mixed with politics. The police frequently beat and shoot protestors. Common criminals and armed gunmen retaliate against their foes late at night, as they did when I was visiting—ambushing a police patrol at the spot where two years prior the police had killed two political protestors.

There are many reasons for the problems in Chile. Most stem from the transition agreement brokered by the US when Chile became once more a “democracy” in 1990.

When Chile made the transition to multi-party democracy, the leaders of the main political parties were

## Chile – Private Wealth and Public Squalor

obliged to operate under a constitution imposed by Pinochet that had locked in the conservative political and economic model designed for Chile by a group of American economists in the 1970s. Among other things the transition agreement guaranteed the Chilean military a large share (10 percent) of copper sales (copper is Chile's main export), guaranteed the former Dictator a seat for life in the Chilean Senate, and guaranteed that newly legalized left-wing political parties such as the Communist Party would not be able to elect representatives to the national government. The agreement also attempted to permanently marginalize labour and indigenous groups.

By 2005 more and more Chileans were fed up with the status quo - even as the right wing domestic media and CNN-Chile told Chileans they had "no alternative". (Sound familiar?) As 2009 dawns, the level of rot and disenchantment is only growing. Having failed to build a solid social safety net, Chile is ill-prepared for the coming economic recession/depression and

Chileans know it. The vast majority of the poor are going to become poorer – and angrier. Social unrest, already widespread, will grow.

Cracks are appearing in the façade of the Chilean economic "miracle". Aware of the widespread unrest, some progressive members of the ruling coalition of Liberal, Christian Democrat, Socialist and Radical parties and the PPD (a social democratic party) are reaching out to the Communist Party and their allies - the Greens and Humanists, who make up the coalition Together We Can do More.

Large numbers of Chileans do not vote because of the rigged electoral system. "Don't Vote" is a slogan often seen painted on walls. However, by promising to change some of the more serious social and economic inequalities, and perhaps even the constitution, progressive politicians are hoping to change the social, political and economic map of Chile – following in the footsteps of so many of their Latin American neighbours. But one thing is for sure – it won't be easy.

## NDP urges McGuinty government to invest \$1.4 billion in poverty reduction

J.A. MacNeil

The provincial NDP is urging the McGuinty government to invest \$1.4 billion in its March budget to do the following:

- Increase the Ontario Child Benefit to \$92 per child per month
- Build 7,500 new units of affordable housing
- Invest \$100-million in new child care spaces
- Increase the shelter allowance for social assistance recipients to 85 percent of market rents
- End the 50 percent claw back of employment earnings of Ontario Disability Support recipients
- Implement a \$100 million preventive dental care plan for low-income Ontarians
- Increase the minimum wage to \$10.25 per hour immediately.

## Toronto's "Toxics Taxi" service to dispose of hazardous waste:

Planning to paint anything in your home or business? If so, remember to dispose of the left over paint, thinner and turpentine safely. For info on what constitutes hazardous household waste, see below.

### What is Household Hazardous Waste?

Paints, pesticides, aerosol spray cans, drain cleaners, propane tanks, batteries, syringes, used motor oil and many cleaning products are just some examples of household hazardous wastes. These items contain toxic ingredients and should be used and disposed of with caution.

*Do not place out for regular garbage pick-up. And please do not pour motor oil, paints or solvents down your drain or into sewers.*

### How to safely dispose of these items

You can take advantage of the city's Toxics Taxi service. It provides free pick-up of hazardous household waste from residents of Toronto with a minimum quantity of 10 litres and a maximum quantity of 50 litres. Call 416-392-4330 for the Toxics Taxi. Given the amounts required, it may make sense to organize a collection of such products with other people in your building or neighbourhood.

Or, if you drive, you can also take hazardous household waste to one of the city's drop off sites. Check this website for details about the hours that various drop-off sites receive hazardous waste <http://www.toronto.ca/garbage/pdf/solidwastedrop-offdepots.pdf>

# NDP Enviro critic Linda Duncan on the budget:

J.A. MacNeil

Here's a summary of our environmental critic Linda Duncan's observations about the budget:

## Transit:

- Not a single dollar specifically committed to public transit

## Clean and Renewable Energy:

- zero new dollars to provide incentives for development and most important, the deployment of renewable energy, save possible support to one wind project in PEI
- reinstates the accelerated capital cost allowance for tar sands and coal-fired energy generation for carbon capture and sequestration (CCS)

## Climate Change:

- Only one reference to climate change in budget
- government touts *nuclear power* as the singular solution to Canada's energy security and climate change goal

## Sustainability:

- The tabled budget lists just three actions to be funded:
  - A Clean Energy Fund to support clean energy development and demonstration, through tax cuts and cash grants. It emphasizes spending Canadians' tax dollars to subsidize experiments with carbon capture and sequestration, a technology slated to benefit Canada's largest carbon emitters—coal fired power generators and tar sand enterprises.
  - A state of the environment report.
  - Another *\$350 million to nuclear power*.
- Taxpayers will subsidize Imperial Oil's Mackenzie Valley pipeline—for work customarily and by law the obligation of the industrial proponent.

- Cuts to the esteemed Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council program: The effect is significant cuts to respected health and environmental research programs (including neuroscience), ending support to valuable scientists, technicians and graduate students. Monies previously allocated to jobs are being transferred to buy equipment, most of which is manufactured outside Canada, leading to lost jobs, lost research, lost opportunities and acceleration of "brain drain" to the US.

## Water:

- No major commitment to Great Lakes, addressing climate impacts on water sources including Prairie waters, or safe drinking water: only \$165 million for safe drinking water and wastewater for 18 First Nations
- No money to monitor and protect source water
- More subsidization of the tar sands projects despite their pollution of the Athabasca/Peace/MacKenzie transboundary river basins

## New Environmental Policy Context:

In this budget, the government is taking the position that delays in the disbursement of infrastructure money under the Building Canada programme are caused by burdensome environmental requirements, rather than by the programme's own red tape. It is also dangerously assuming that environmental laws are a barrier to jobs and prosperity, although not a single concrete example to that effect has been provided and empirical studies show that regulation is the key driver for investment in cleaner technologies. Weak laws and the absence of appropriate fiscal measures will in fact create a chilly environment for investments in Canadian clean alternatives.

Contrary to the image the Minister of Environment conveys of this Budget, this "greenest fiscal package" is in fact very brown at its core.

## NEXT ON THE CHOPPING BLOCK: CANADA'S ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS

Information has come to light that broad-based and deeper cuts to environmental laws—laws developed over more than four decades—are about to be brought forward. Those changes will apparently be fast-tracked, but not so the promised cleaner car rules.

"The leaked documents show the Conservatives are planning to rush

a watered-down version of the Environmental Assessment Act through parliament as early as March or April. The new rules would exempt the following from environmental assessment: any Building Canada infrastructure projects under \$10 million regardless of the environmental or health risk; any project on federal lands or using federal dollars; and, any project that

a provincial government asks be exempted. It has also been revealed the new law would limit federal oversight of environmental impact assessment to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA), except for reviews mandated to the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission and the National Energy Board (NEB)", notes Linda Duncan.

# Oil Sands: “One of the most destructive projects ever undertaken” warns NDP enviro critic

Linda Duncan, MP



As you may be aware, I was recently elected to represent the constituents of Edmonton-Strathcona. I have also had the honour of being appointed the NDP Environment Critic.

I am the only NDP Member of Parliament – indeed the only opposition MP – in the entire province of Alberta. I am also the only federal MP from Alberta who is willing to stand up to big oil to protect the environment, human and wildlife health, and First Nations rights.

The oil sands, or tar sands as they are also known, are one of the most destructive projects ever undertaken on earth. Oil sands companies have been granted licenses to use twice the amount of fresh water that the entire city of Calgary uses in a year. Of that water, at least 90 percent ends up in tailing ponds so toxic that propane

cannons are used to keep ducks from landing. These toxic tailing ponds are enormous – they are among the largest human-made structures in the world, spanning 50 square kilometres. They are visible from space.

The pace of development of oil sands projects has been very rapid, making it very difficult to track and monitor all the health and environmental effects of the industry. That is why the NDP, working with the local groups and First Nations, have called for a moratorium on new projects until the problems that have become evident have been addressed.

I recently learned that Syncrude and other oil companies have plans to release tailings into the Athabasca River, and I have grave concerns over the health and environmental repercussions.

The federal government has a responsibility to protect the Athabasca and the people and wildlife that rely on it. Dumping of contaminated wastes into these rivers clearly triggers federal responsibilities, such as fisheries, transborder waters and Aboriginal lands and peoples. By law, affected First Nations must be notified and consulted prior to the adoption of such

policies or the issuing of any permits.

The Environment Minister must do everything in his power to prevent industry from going ahead with this reckless plan.

The Athabasca flows north to the Peace, Slave and MacKenzie River systems. Any contamination will affect the water supply that is the lifeblood of countless northern communities and will further threaten the fisheries and wildlife already suffering from the adverse effects of the pace and intensity of tar sands development.

While I have lauded reports that Alberta is considering prescribing stricter requirements for tar sands waste, I can not accept that the solution to the tailings problem is to drain these highly contaminated waters into rivers already at risk.

**Editor's note: See Duncan's critique of the federal budget. For more information on current subsidization of fossil fuel use, see: It's time for a green New Deal, by Maude Barlow and Mary Corkery, The Rabble, January 26 2009:**<http://www.rabble.ca/news/its-time-green-new-deal> )

**For further information on high cancer rates among indigenous people near the tar sands, see:**[http://ca.news.yahoo.com/s/reuters/090206/canada/canada\\_us\\_health\\_oil-sands](http://ca.news.yahoo.com/s/reuters/090206/canada/canada_us_health_oil-sands)

## Budget: Big bucks for nuclear, no action on climate change

For more analysis of the environmental impact of the federal budget, see:

Greenpeace: <http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/recent/harper-wrong-to-support-false>

Suzuki Foundation: <http://www.davidsuzuki.org/latestnews/dsfnews01280901.asp>

Council of Canadians: <http://www.canadians.org/energy/issues/budget2009.html>

For further information on the tar sands, see:

Shut Down the Tar Sands, Petr Cizek, Canadian Dimension, January/February 2009, Volume 43, Number 1

Greenpeace's footage of the tar sands: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG2sJAn47QI&feature=related>

Interview with Fort MacKay Cree elders on impact of tar sands:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG2sJAn47QI&feature=related>

# The Looming Pension Crisis

Charles Campbell  
Research Director  
United Steelworkers Canadian  
National Office

Anxiety about how to pay for a secure retirement – which polls show has been growing for years – shot up to new heights in recent months as the Wall Street financial meltdown spread to jobs and investment portfolios in Canada and around the world.

The concern affects everyone who hopes to retire someday – but especially those without workplace pension plans or Registered Retirement Savings Plans. According to the latest statistics, only 31 percent of male workers and 33 percent of female workers in Canada are covered by defined benefit pension plans – the gold standard.

At least some of those without pension coverage have been able to put aside money in Registered Retirement Savings Accounts – but that still leaves roughly one-fourth of Canadian families without either pension or RRSP savings, according to Statistics Canada.

Those families are completely dependent on the public retirement

income plans – Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Security – which together provide a maximum of \$1425 monthly for a single person over age 65, for an annual income barely above \$17,000. Many will receive much less than that because they have suffered either spells of unemployment or low wages, or both.

For workers fortunate enough to be covered by pension plans, there is increasing worry about whether employers are putting aside enough money to guarantee full payments. A recent report by pension consultants Watson Wyatt Worldwide found that the funding ratio of a typical Canadian defined benefit pension plan dropped from 96 percent at the beginning of 2008 to just 69 percent at the end of the year.

The implication is alarming, because if a company goes bankrupt with a pension plan just 69 percent funded – and that's the average, so many are in even worse shape – then workers and retirees will see their pension cheques cut back, with only a portion of the loss covered by Ontario's Pension Benefit Guarantee Fund.

Faced with this frightening news,

some commentators are jumping to a conclusion that will just make things worse – that defined benefit pensions are destined for the scrapheap of history, and that workers would be better off with such alternatives as defined contribution plans or just their own RRSPs.

To take a moment for definitions, in a defined benefit pension plan, an employee is guaranteed a certain amount of monthly pension income after retirement, based on a formula that normally takes account of years of service and possibly average salary over a period of time. In a defined contribution plan, the employer puts a specified amount aside for investment on the employee's behalf, and the eventual retirement income is however much that sum happens to provide, subject to fluctuations of stock markets and interest rates.

It's a complicated business, that comes down to one basic fact: in a defined benefit plan, the risks involved are pooled among all employees and across generations, and falls mostly on the employer, whereas in a defined contribution or RRSP, all the risk falls on each individual (Cont'd on p. 13)

## Steady State economics: a recent discussion

A small band of Parkdale-High Park New Democrats recently met during a heavy snow storm to discuss an important topic: Steady State Economics -- Necessary Policy or Utopian Fantasy? We agreed that the current economic model is not only unjust, but environmentally unsustainable. The basis for the discussion was the following article by Herman Daly:

[http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/81/steady\\_state\\_economy.html](http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/81/steady_state_economy.html)

Lively discussion ensued about the feasibility of full employment with a no-growth model, and the various scenarios that would entail.

Daly makes ten suggestions for urgently needed actions to back away from the "tipping point", after which ecological and economic disaster will likely be inevitable. The discussion revealed many of the underlying tensions between the environmental imperatives, which are virtually univer-

sally recognized by the left, and the public policies needed to effectively address them.

The Parkdale-High Park NDP Riding Association Education Committee organizes periodic political discussions. If you wish to be advised of future meetings, please contact Terry Burrell by e-mail at [terryburrell@rogers.com](mailto:terryburrell@rogers.com) or by telephone at 416-533-6660.

## The Looming Pension Crisis

worker, subject to bad investments, bad timing or a market meltdown.

The fact is, all the factors that wiped out a quarter of the value of Canada's pension funds, according to Watson Wyatt's study, also hit the RRSP holdings of millions of Canadians – basically everybody who held stocks or equity mutual funds in their accounts. We know less about the situation of all those people, but they're in a worse situation than workers with an underfunded pension plan, because they're much less well-placed to make up the shortfall over time.

In this context, the proposed solution – get out of defined benefit pension plans and let everyone fend for themselves – is just nuts.

Fortunately, the Ontario government has the opportunity to act on a

set of sound, balanced recommendations put forward late last year by an expert commission headed by Harry Arthurs, an Osgoode Hall Law School professor. His report runs to 224 pages and makes dozens of proposals too varied to summarize, but important recommendations include increasing the coverage of the Pension Benefits Guarantee Fund to \$2,500 monthly from the current \$1,000 limit, inflation protection for pensions and real employee involvement in pension plan governance.

Arthurs also put forward interesting ideas about how to expand pension coverage to more Ontario workers.

The danger today is that the McGuinty government may become so focused on dealing with the immediate solvency challenges of

many pension funds that debate and action on some of the more far-reaching recommendations are deferred, possibly for years.

To end on a positive note, many Canadians are also concerned that the Canada Pension Plan might also be in danger. This worry is almost certainly unwarranted. CPP funding is very well established, with projections extending at least 75 years into the future. The most serious problem with CPP is that the pensions are too small; the current maximum is \$908.75 per month.

Today's crisis in workplace pension plans and private RRSPs make increasing the level of CPP pensions an idea whose time has come. The political difficulty will be that this would also involve raising contribution rates on employees and employers.

## Book Reviews

Grace Scheel

**Chris Turner. *The Geography of Hope: A Tour of the World We Need.* Vintage Canada, 2008.**

Chris Turner in his inspirational book, "The Geography of Hope: A Tour of the World We Need", states that we are "as close to a cross-roads as we have ever come . . . the implications of our choice of path are global in scale and monumental in impact." With Robert Frost he encourages us to take "the road less traveled." He asks us individually and collectively to make sustainable choices and to confront the "ecological time-bomb ticking away." To assist us, and armed with the belief that anything that exists is possible, he takes us on an ecological road trip across the planet. From Taos, New Mexico to Singapore to Malmo, Sweden he uncovers creative and

ingenious evidence of fully realized sustainable projects. His book abounds in ideas and tools to help us move from hope to action. I hope.

**Dr. Seuss. *The Lorax. Random House, 1999.***

Chris Turner quotes from three sources in the front of his book, one of which is "The Lorax" by Dr. Seuss. This is a children's book for all ages. It's a fable for our time set in a world of Grickle grass, slow-sour winds and old crows. A world where, once upon a time, the grass was green, ponds were wet and clouds were clean and there were miles and miles of Truffula trees. You guessed it, the Once-ler, an entrepreneur, saw a business opportunity and he took it. He chopped trees and made Thneeds (A sort of cover which you had to be convinced you needed!). The Lorax, who spoke for the trees,

begged him to cease and desist...the answer: "I'm figgering on biggering and biggering and biggering and BIGGERING!" It all sounds so familiar . . . globalization, created need (think of the enticing car ads set not in gridlock, but on empty mountain roads!), and environmental havoc.

With the Lorax gone and the world a dreary mess the now sorrowful Once-ler gives the very last Truffula seed to Dr. Seuss and asks him to plant it. "Treat it with care. Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air. Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack. Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back." And, in a message to all of us, he says, "the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear. UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

# Gaza: Just when peace was about to break out . . .

(Cont'd from p.1) Hamas retaliated by firing rockets into southern Israel, killing one man, injuring several others. After several days of air and missile strikes on Gaza, Israeli troops entered Gaza and began artillery shelling, while continuing the air strikes. The world looked on as the Palestinian civilian death toll mounted. Canadian PM Stephen Harper and then-US President George Bush both defended the Israeli attack on Gaza, on the grounds that Hamas was a terrorist organization.

By the time Israel announced its ceasefire on January 18, according to an Israeli human rights group citing Palestinian sources, an estimated 1300 Palestinians had been killed, 410 of them children and 104 of them women. As well, according to the same sources, 5320 Palestinians were injured, 250 of them severely. Ten Israeli soldiers and three civilians were killed, 113 soldiers were injured, 20 of them moderately or severely, and 84 civilians were injured, 4 of them severely.

It is true that civilians are inevitably casualties in any war. However, under international humanitarian law, *all* parties to a conflict have an obligation to ensure that civilian casualties are minimal and not disproportional to the military advantage gained by a certain attack. I interpret this to mean that neither party can simply, for example, bomb a building or a neighbourhood, thereby causing 50 or 60 civilian casualties, in an attempt to kill three or four combatants.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the President of the UN Security Council have both called for Israel to be investigated for war crimes. Israel is accused, justly in my view, of using disproportionate force

and inflicting an unacceptable number of civilian casualties in Gaza, thereby violating international humanitarian law concerning the conduct of war.

As well, according to Human Rights Watch, there is disturbing evidence of the use of white phosphorus by Israel. The use of it in densely populated areas—and Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas on earth—is forbidden under the Geneva Conventions, because it burns whatever it falls on, including human flesh and homes.

## The motive for the assault on Gaza — sorting fact from fiction:

During the assault on Gaza, Israel claimed that it initiated the air and missile strikes in response to thousands of rocket attacks from Gaza and Hamas's alleged breaking of the June ceasefire, thereby conjuring up in the foreign imagination a *recent constant* barrage causing multiple Israeli deaths. Both Bush and Harper echoed this claim. The reality is different.

In a revealing recent BBC interview, available on YouTube, the Israeli P.M.'s spokesman Mark Regev admitted that in fact Hamas had not fired any rockets at Israel during the four-month

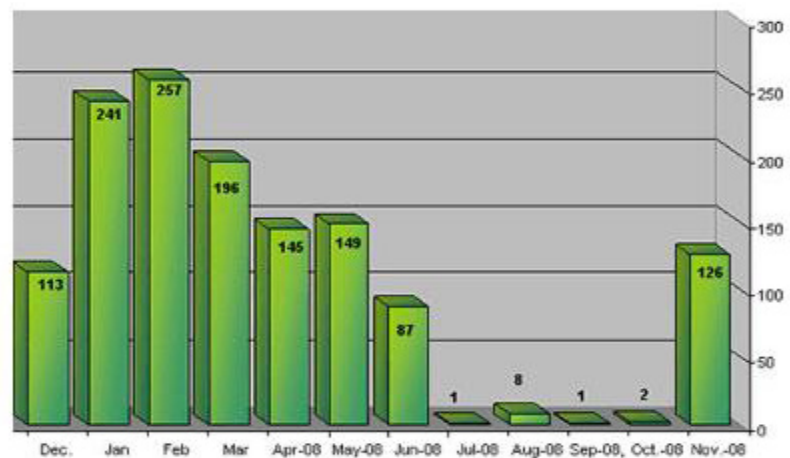
ceasefire prior to Israel's own Nov. 4 attack on Hamas fighters in Gaza. There had been 15 rocket attacks from Gaza by *other* groups during that period, which Israel acknowledges were not fired by Hamas. (See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfFMZ7Y-s\\_c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfFMZ7Y-s_c)) No Israelis were killed by any of the rockets fired from Gaza after the June 16 ceasefire prior to the initiation on December 27 of the Israeli assault.

An Israeli government graph (later removed from its website) of rocket attacks confirms that the ceasefire had been in fact quite effective until Israel violated it.

It should be noted that the June number for rocket attacks (87), comprises 84 prior to the ceasefire and 3 after it.

The welcome freedom from rocket attacks during the June 16-Nov. 4 ceasefire was confirmed by 500 residents of Sderot, a Jewish settlement very close to Gaza, according to an article by Janine Roberts.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, founder of the progressive Jewish magazine *Tikkun*, notes, "*Hamas had respected the previously negotiated ceasefire except when Israel used the ceasefire as cover to make assassination raids against*



The removed Israeli government graph: 'Monthly distribution of rockets hits.'

# Gaza: Just when peace was about to break out . . .

*Hamas and other Palestinian leaders. Arguing that these raids were hardly a manifestation of ceasefire, Hamas would, as symbolic protest, allow the release of rocket fire (usually hitting no targets). But when the issue of continuing the ceasefire came up, Hamas wanted a guarantee that these assassination raids would stop. And it asked for more. With hundreds of thousands of Palestinians facing acute malnutrition bordering on starvation, Hamas insisted that the borders be opened to counter Israeli attempts to starve the Gazans into submission. And in return for the captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, it asks for the release of a thousand Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.”*

The question arises: *Why did Israel break the ceasefire on November 4, when the ceasefire was working?*

As noted by Augustus Richard Norton and Sara Roy, “the success of the Israel-Hamas truce tacitly legitimized political dialogue with the Islamists, something that Israel (as well as the U.S. and Egypt) vehemently rejects. Equally important, while the truce was holding there was greater talk internationally about possible negotiations and freezing illegal Israeli settlement expansion and moves to boycott products made in those settlements. There were also growing calls for compromises that successive Israeli governments have been unwilling to make. Despite recent comments from outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert linking Israel’s survival to withdrawal from the occupied West Bank, Israel has consistently rejected a viable two-state solution because it insists on maintaining control of the West Bank.”

This is a discouraging explanation, but the only one that rings true.

Norton and Roy note that Hamas’s

rejection of a six-month extension of the ceasefire was a gift to the Israeli administration. As well, “The periodic rain of rockets from Gaza into Israel since November 4 provoked broad public support for military action against Hamas. With President Bush soon packing his bags for Texas, there was also a strong incentive on Israel’s part to capitalize on support from a predictably pliant White House.”

## Observations:

### *The context of the current conflict*

Israel’s policy of extending military control and encouraging Jewish settlements beyond the pre-1967 borders is unethical, illegal under international law, and has generated intense and justified bitterness among Palestinians. A glance at the evolving borders of Israeli-controlled territory over the years tells the story (see map below). The policy has also served as a pretext for virulent anti-Israeli positions by several Middle Eastern states, including many who, as demonstrated by their past behaviour, probably don’t care

much about the Palestinians. Therefore, the Israeli government should either comply with the 2003 Geneva Accord proposals or simply withdraw completely to within the pre-67 borders and discontinue any support or defence of Jewish settlers who insist on remaining behind in the Occupied Territories.

The Palestinian suicide bomber attacks, the launching of thousands of rockets on Israel from Gaza and southern Lebanon in recent years, and the emergence of fundamentalist Islamist governments vitriolically hostile to Israel (for example Iran), have provoked a siege mentality within Israel that makes it impossible for many ordinary Jewish Israelis to feel safe enough to calmly consider the options and take the necessary steps toward a durable peace with the Palestinians. Although recent polling indicates they know in their souls that withdrawal to the pre-67 borders will be a necessary step for any permanent peace with the Palestinians, they do not demand that their government do so, due to their fears.

Hamas should discontinue its own attacks and, as the governing author-



# Gaza: Just when peace was about to break out . . .

ity of Gaza, take all reasonable steps to prevent rocket attacks being launched by others. It should urge Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon to do so as well.

*That said, it must be noted that the rocket attacks from Gaza that Israel claims triggered the recent Israeli air strikes and ground invasion have resulted in relatively few fatalities over the years and do not represent a genuine threat to the existence of Israel.* (For more on the ineffectual nature of these attacks, and their impact on the Israeli civilian population, see: [Rabbi Michael Lerner on Israel in Gaza](http://files.tikkun.org/current/article.php/20090102124321774), January 5, 2009, *Tikkun*: <http://files.tikkun.org/current/article.php/20090102124321774> )

Israel's refusal to allow the free flow of vital foodstuffs during the cease-fire broken by its own November 4<sup>th</sup> incursion, and during the attack initiated on December 27, violates international humanitarian law. It is unethical, unwise and counterproductive to try to starve a civilian population into submission. Canada should unequivocally condemn the blockade and call upon Israel to lift it and allow food and other necessities of life to freely enter Gaza, subject to reasonable checks for weapons at the point of entry. No starving population can consider its options calmly and flexibly. The Palestinians are no exception.

## *The Nature of Hamas*

The Canadian left should have no illusions: Hamas is not a Middle Eastern version of, say, Nicaragua's Sandinistas. One of its three co-founders was a vocal Holocaust denier until his death, hardly the kind of man most progressives would choose to consort with.

Nevertheless, neither is it is appro-

priate to lump Hamas in with the Nazis and the Taliban.

Unlike the Nazis, Hamas has not proposed the extermination of the Jews, but rather an end to the occupation of the territories seized since 1967, which, it must be recalled, were already considerably smaller than the territories designated as the Palestinians' in the 1947 UN-approved partition agreement. Although some of its leaders, and its constitution, call for an end to Israel (a call with which I do not agree), none call for the extermination of the Jews. Prior to the recent assault on Israel, many of the Hamas leaders—unfortunately not all of them—had indicated acceptance that the shape of a durable peace would be a two-state solution, with each state within the internationally-recognised pre-67 borders (see Haniyeh's statement in the Haaretz article cited below). Pre-assault polling also indicated the majority of Gaza residents accepted the pre-67 borders.

Regarding the allegations that Hamas is a Palestinian version of the Taliban, there are salient differences. The Taliban banned all trade unions when they took over Afghanistan, whereas Hamas has not. Palestinian women in Gaza are free to work, to move about unaccompanied by male relatives in the streets, and are not forcibly restricted by Hamas in their dress—rights routinely denied women by the Taliban when it ruled Afghanistan and by various Iranian regimes. Palestinians can engage in whatever recreational activities and listen to whatever music they wish (provided they survive the bombings), whereas the Taliban have forbidden such benign activities as kite-flying, and ruthlessly and violently restricted the civilian population's access to certain kinds

of music in the parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan that they control.

Hamas, for all its talk, is relatively moderate as Islamist groups go. *Efraim Halevy, former head of Israel's Mossad, has publicly called upon Israel (and the US) to talk with Hamas.* The Fatah leadership (i.e. the Palestinian Authority operating in the West Bank) is widely perceived as corrupt, ineffectual and ossified. In contrast, Hamas has actually delivered hospitals, schools, libraries and desperately needed social services. Neither Israel nor the US and Canada can continue insisting that Fatah is the only or most legitimate Palestinian interlocutor with which Israel should negotiate.

As pointed out by Robert Fisk, Palestinians voted for Hamas not because they truly yearned for an Islamic republic, but because they were tired of Fatah's corruption and the ineffectiveness of the Palestinian Authority it runs. Demonisation of Hamas is not constructive.

## *The fallout from the Gaza assault*

Israel's most recent offensive, rather than weakening civilian support for Hamas, has strengthened it and also fanned the flames of more vitriolic currents of fundamentalism in Gaza (both inside and outside of Hamas) and the West Bank. If Israel does not negotiate with Hamas, it will soon find itself confronting more extreme groups who will not accept the pre-67 borders as the basis for negotiation, and who may not be interested in negotiations of any sort.

As well, as Fawaz Gerges ably documents in his recent article in *The Nation*, Israel's assault on Gaza is radicalizing mainstream Muslim

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opinion elsewhere in the Middle East and, I don't doubt, in Muslim Asian countries, such as Indonesia.

The Canadian government would do well to remember this, instead of pouring gasoline on the flames by making inflammatory statements about Hamas. Perhaps Haley should talk with Harper.

*The importance of language and proportion—a reminder to Canadian peace activists*

Recent assertions by some of Israel's critics that "Israel is as bad as Nazi Germany" are profoundly offensive and counterproductive. Whenever such exaggerated assertions are made, it is clear that the accuracy of anything else out of the mouths of the same authors will be questionable, because they are already playing loose with the facts and exhibiting an appalling lack of sense of proportion.

Let's be honest: *no nation* is as bad as Nazi Germany was, given the sheer magnitude and completely unprovoked nature of its genocide against an utterly defenceless European Jewry. Yes, Israel has committed many atrocities (as have, with a dramatically lower death toll, Palestinian suicide bombers), but *all* atrocities since the Holocaust pale beside it. Palestinian women and children are *not* being marched to the gas chamber by the millions, nor are all Palestinians in the West Bank being denied by Israel the right to depart to a friendlier country. Palestinians jailed on terrorism charges can and do have lawyers, often dedicated Jewish ones. Some Arab Israelis can and do attend university, graduate and hold jobs in the West Bank and Gaza; some in the West Bank even travel in

and out of Israel. The same cannot be said of the Jews in Nazi Germany during the Holocaust years, not one of whom, let's remember, had launched a single rocket against the Nazi government before being slated for extermination. (See Robert Fisk and Ayman Fadel's cogent articles on this issue.)

Therefore, more prudence in the tenor of criticisms of Israel is in order, especially when Israel's real offences in Gaza are so serious

The words "Zionist" and "Zionism" have now become too amorphous in their meaning, and Toronto peace activists would do well to avoid using them. I say "amorphous" because many Jews who defend Palestinian rights—for example, the pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, a friend of the late Palestinian activist Edward Said—also define themselves as Zionist, in the sense of believing that Jews have a right to a Jewish state in the Middle East, roughly within the borders defined in 1948 or 1967. There's no point in using such a loaded word—or spitting it out as an epithet—when, depending on how it is defined, it can cover everyone from Jews who simply defend the Jewish people's right to a Jewish state in the Middle East to the most obnoxiously anti-Arab Knesset member calling for the "transfer" of all Palestinians to neighbouring Arab states.

Activists supporting Palestinians' just claims should also refrain from resorting to a common claim of Holocaust deniers—that "Zionists" conspired with Nazis to exterminate their fellow Jews. Demonisation of Israel is also counterproductive.

*Words must have a precise meaning or communication becomes impossible, and with it, nuanced and constructive*

*support for the negotiated settlement of political disputes, including this protracted and tragic one.*

## **The way forward — recognizing and overcoming history:**

The burden for initiating the concessions needed by both sides to advance toward peace lies with Israel, as a consolidated state and the stronger military and economic power of the two groups. For all that Israelis are genuinely traumatized by rocket attacks from Gaza and threatening statements by neighbouring countries, their country is the fifth largest military power in the world.

Israel should stop making the formal recognition by Palestinians of its right to have established itself a precondition to serious peace negotiations. Since the founding of Israel involved (unnecessarily, in my view) the dispossession of thousands of Palestinians of their land, and the expulsion of thousands of others, asking the Palestinians to formally recognize Israel's right to exist is provocative, especially in the wake of the recent assault on Gaza. Israel should instead settle for a commitment to allow Israelis to live peacefully within the pre-67 borders.

Likewise, the descendents of Palestinians who fled or were expelled in 1948 will likely have to drop their claim to the right to return to their ancestral homes within what is now Israel, and instead accept that Gaza and the West Bank, with perhaps an internationally supervised neutral corridor connecting the two, will be the shape of their new country. They then could get on with the task of shaping their own destiny as a nation within those borders.

However, down the road, formal

# Gaza: Just when peace was about to break out . . .

recognition of the legitimacy of each other's presence in the Middle East and the need of each for a state would, I think, be a healing step.

The Palestinian-Israeli relationship is fraught with the weight of each other's errors and with the legacy of the Holocaust, which must be dealt with in order for both peoples to move forward toward peaceful coexistence.

Israelis should disavow the attitudes most notoriously expressed in Golda Meir's obnoxious 1967 comment, "It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist."

Her implication that Palestine was empty or populated almost solely by Jews before the modern state of Israel was founded is manifestly untrue. British censuses in the 1920s and 1930s indicate there were in fact more Muslims than Jews in what was then Palestine. There have been Arabic settlements in the Palestine-Israel area for millenia, just as there have been Jewish ones.

Given Israel's constant encroachment on Palestinian lands since 1967—contrary to international law—Palestinian mistrust of Israel is not surprising. A withdrawal by Israel to pre-67 borders and a commitment to stay there is essential. The Israelis must allow Palestinians what the world allowed Jews in 1947: the dignity of their own sovereign country.

Likewise, Palestinians should recognize the factuality of the Holocaust, and the centrality of it for Jews. Imagine for a moment how different the history of the Middle East in the 20<sup>th</sup> century might have been had Arab Palestinians said to Europe's Jews during

WWII, "come home, cousins, there is room for you with us and your brother Jews still here in the land of Abraham." Not only was welcome not extended, but instead, most Arabs were emotionally on the German side during World War II: polling at that time indicated that 88 percent of Palestinian Arabs favoured Germany over Britain.

For Arabs, Germans were the enemies of their enemies - the colonial French and British regimes operating in the Middle East. Anwar el-Sadat, later president of Egypt, was imprisoned by the British for collaborating with Rommel, the Nazi field marshal, during WWII. As well, the Palestinian *mufti* Mohammad Amin al-Husayni sided with Hitler, encouraged Bosnian and Albanian Muslims to collaborate with the Nazis, and—damagingly for current Jewish-Arab relations—was apparently welcomed into Egypt as a hero after the war, despite or perhaps because of the notoriety of his Nazi ties. Although allegations that he was an architect of the Holocaust are untrue, his collaboration with the Nazis is a matter of historical record. The fact that an Arab nation on what is now Israel's southern border welcomed him continues to horrify many Jews, legitimately, although the *mufti* and those who welcomed him are now long dead and he may not have had that much popular support among Palestinians.

Israelis' skepticism about the utility of negotiations with Hamas stems in part from the fact that one of its co-founders, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, was a vocal Holocaust denier prior to his 2004 assassination by the Israeli military after he allegedly directed various suicide bombings against civilians.

Iran's sponsorship of a 2006 Holocaust denial conference, and its Jan.

30, 2009 endorsement of yet another such conference have also reinforced many Canadian and Israeli Jews' perception that the Muslim world will forever be hostile to Jews and simply cannot be trusted. This strengthens the hand of right-wing hard-liners in Israeli politics, as the Feb. 10 elections have demonstrated. Canadian peace activists should be vociferous in their condemnation of Holocaust deniers.

A clear-cut acknowledgement by the Palestinians, especially Hamas, of the reality and magnitude of the Holocaust would be a useful step and perhaps allow trust to develop. Some Palestinians have already done so, notably Mahmoud Al-Safadi, who, shortly after his release following 17 years in prison for his activities in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—an armed secular socialist Palestinian group—wrote an open letter to Iranian President Ahmadinejad condemning the latter's Holocaust denial as baseless, unjust and counter-productive for the Palestinian cause.

Nevertheless, the Holocaust—a crime committed by Europeans with the indifference of many nations, including, shamefully, Canada—cannot be used by Israel to justify the harassment of and discrimination against Arab Israelis in Israel and Palestinians in the West Bank since 1948, nor the destruction of their homes in acts of collective reprisals for the actions of a few terrorists, nor the construction of the Wall through Arab community after community in recent years in the Occupied Territories.

Nor does the Holocaust justify the recent assault on Gaza.

Deliberate attacks on the civilian population are war crimes, whether committed by Palestinian suicide

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bombers entering Israel, or by the Israeli military. No grievance, however legitimate, justifies war crimes.

As British Labour party MP Gerald Kaufman—raised as an Orthodox Jew and a descendent of Holocaust victims—movingly noted when he recently called upon the British government to impose an arms embargo on Israel:

*“My grandmother was ill in bed when the Nazis came to her home town. A German soldier shot her dead in her bed. My grandmother did not die to provide cover for Israeli soldiers murdering Palestinian grandmothers in Gaza.”*

## Parting words:

I support Israeli peace activists’ call for economic and political sanctions to oblige Israel to negotiate with the Palestinians (including, yes, Hamas!) in good faith, and to respect international law and human rights norms in its dealings with the Palestinians. As Naomi Klein recently noted, Western powers’ attempts at “constructive engagement” with Israel (dialogue without sanctions) have failed utterly to shape Israel’s behaviour. The ongoing encroachment on Palestinian land by Israeli settlers, the attack on Lebanon and the blockade and assault of Gaza demonstrate this.

I am not an expert, and acknowledge this. I also want to lay out the positions I had before I began writing the above article—positions which in some minds will be evidence of biases. [I do so because I’ve been dismayed at the degree to which the parties to the conflict and their respective supporters in Toronto so often believe themselves to be the unbiased owners of the truth—the only ones who “get it”—

and blithely deny those truths that are inconvenient for their arguments.]

*I believe Israel has a right to exist within the borders proposed in the 2003 Geneva Accord (see explanation below), which are based on the pre-1967 allocation of land, but with adjustments, free from physical attacks of any sort, including rockets and suicide bombers, and free from the threatening statements currently made by some of its neighbours, notably Iran. Contrary to the impression given by Hamas, and some media outlets, Jews are not interlopers in the Middle East, but rather have for thousands of years lived in Israel and throughout the rest of the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere near the Mediterranean. They often suffered oppression and violence in those regions and the ones to which they subsequently fled. It seems to me appropriate that the Jews, as a people, have a country and that that country be located roughly where Israel is today.*

*I also believe the Palestinians, too, have a right to their own country, and to compensation for having been dispossessed of their lands and homes both during the founding of the modern Israeli state and by actions taken after. Israel must withdraw from the territories occupied after 1967, unless it can reach an agreement with the Palestinians for a swap of land.*

*The Palestinians also have the right to live free from incursions and bombings, and not to be subjected to blockades. The Israeli blockade of foodstuffs that was imposed for most of the last 18 months is unethical and violates international law, which prohibits collective retribution against a civilian population. It must be immediately halted.*

*I don’t believe a one-state solution is feasible or, frankly, even desirable, for the following reasons:*

*- there is currently too much enmity between Palestinians and Jews for them to form an effective, unified government.* As left-wing Israeli peace activist and former Knesset member Uri Avnery noted in 2004, “If someone despairs of swimming the English Channel and decides, therefore, to swim across the Atlantic Ocean, it might be considered slightly odd. When my Palestinian friend, Michael Tarazy, despairs of the two-state solution and now advocates One State (IHT, Oct. 5), it does not look to me much more realistic.”

*- Jewish Israelis have no reason to run the risk of soon finding themselves living in an Arab state, let alone a fundamentalist Islamic one—a real possibility in a generation or two, because of the demographics. Any claim by the international community that it could guarantee that a unitary Israeli-Palestinian state would remain secular, even if the Muslim percentage of the population outstrips the Jewish one, rings extremely hollow. Ensuring that would also require unacceptable interventions in the internal affairs of that state.*

*- a two-state solution can be more quickly arrived at than a one-state solution, thereby addressing the Palestinians’ urgent need for an economically and politically sustainable territory and relieving the humanitarian crisis that is making Palestinians’ lives hellish.*

*- a two-state solution does not preclude the future negotiation of the establishment of a unitary secular state, if both Jews and Palestinians so desire down the road. However, I suspect they will not.*

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Note: **The Geneva Accord/Initiative** is an extra-governmental proposal arrived at in 2003 between prominent Palestinian and Israeli political figures, including Palestinian Authority Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo and former Israeli Labour party Knesset member Yossi Beilin. It was endorsed by Jimmy Carter and Noam Chomsky. It was never endorsed by either the Israeli government or the Palestinian Authority. The borders for each state would be similar to the borders prior to the Six Day War in 1967, with some swapping of land since occupied by Israel in exchange for allocation of more land near Gaza to the Palestinians. In exchange for the return of land annexed by Israel on the West Bank, the Palestinians would limit their claim to the right to return to lands now within Israel to numbers to be agreed upon with Israel.

## Partial list of sources of information:

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Sara Roy, Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict  
David Shulman: Dark Hope – Working for Peace in Israel and Palestine  
Philip C. Winslow: Victory for us is to see you suffer – In the West Bank with the Palestinians and the Israelis

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<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090112/eldar>  
Various other articles on the conflict available at the The Nation website:  
[http://www.thenation.com/sections/israeli\\_palestinian\\_conflict?rel=hp\\_currently](http://www.thenation.com/sections/israeli_palestinian_conflict?rel=hp_currently) )

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