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FAST FACTS

March 16, 2012

Thinking Alternatives

It is essential that we oppose the terribly destructive policies being imposed upon us by the federal Conservative government, but it is equally if not more important that we think and talk about the kind of alternative approaches that we need.

A useful starting point in thinking alternatives is a small book by the late Tony Judt, titled *Ill Fares the Land* (Penguin 2010). Judt says: “Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For 30 years we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest,” out of “the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor.” He adds: “We cannot go on living like this....We know something is wrong and there are many things we don’t like. But what can we believe in? We seem unable to conceive of alternatives.”

His view, and ours, is that what we can believe in, and what we should publicly make the case for, is a more collective and egalitarian, and a less individualistic and narrowly materialistic, approach to our way of living and our governance.

Stephen Harper and Britain’s David Cameron, and before them Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and to our south the truly remarkable crew now contesting the Republican Presidential nomination, all believe we are better off if we

assume that we are, and govern ourselves as if we were, simply and only individuals. Thatcher went so far as to say that there is no such thing as “society.” There are only individuals and their families.

Judt rejects this reasoning, arguing that the individualist pursuit of narrow self-interest, and the belief that all that matters is the relentless quest for limitless prosperity and material wealth, is destructive of the collective good, and a diminution of what it means to be fully human. It promotes an emptiness that can be filled only by the increasingly aggressive demands to consume, demands that are destroying not only our collective wellbeing, but the very earth that sustains us. This is, among other things, an ethical issue. A progressive politics ought to include an ethical vision.

Judt argues in favour of returning to the more collective and egalitarian approach to living and governing that characterized the quarter century following the Second World War. Margaret Thatcher got it wrong. Individuals and families don’t live in isolation from each other. On the contrary, we are all dependent, one upon the other, for our day-to-day subsistence and our survival as a species. Rather than the greed and growing intolerance and insecurity that are promoted by the appeal to narrow, materialistic individualism, our individual wellbeing is better ensured by developing



CCPA
 CANADIAN CENTRE
 for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
 MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
 Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
 T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
 ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
 www.policyalternatives.ca

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greater levels of mutual support and solidarity, and by sharing the fruits of our collective efforts---in such a way that no one is left out. This necessitates that we build collective institutions, which in turn requires that governments invest in our collective wellbeing.

The result of governments doing so would be a move away from the truly intolerable gap that has emerged these last three decades between extreme wealth, and debilitating poverty. The growing gap between rich and poor, and the squeezing out of the middle class, is the product of the relentless promotion by the political Right of greed, and of excessive individualism and materialism. The evidence is overwhelming that more equality brings with it better health, improved educational achievement, lowered levels of violence, plus greater levels of mutual trust and security. Judt observes: "Inequality is corrosive. It rots societies from within." It is an ethical issue. It is ethically wrong that some should be rich beyond comprehension while others barely survive. It is also an economic issue. We would all be better off if we were to reject those who urge the endless pursuit of wealth, and adopt instead policies characterized by moderation and prudence, directed not to the promotion of a narrow stratum of the obscenely wealthy, but rather to the goal of each of us and all of us having enough.

Taking this approach will require a more progressive form of taxation, and for those who are exceptionally wealthy, a steeply progressive level of taxation, in order to facilitate public investment in the collective benefit of all. Progressive taxation is a good thing. It can facilitate publicly funded and universally available social and economic services of a wide variety of kinds---health; education; pensions; infrastructure, for example. In such an environment each of us and all of us could develop our capacities and capabilities to their full potential, and apply our skills in ways that produce both individual and collective benefits.

Judt argues that our inability to stop the destructive policies of the political Right is a function of our inability to *imagine* a different and better way of living, and he argues that this is a discursive problem: "we simply do not know how to talk about these things any more."

We need to talk about these things. But how do we break the Right's narrative that both taxes and government are bad, and replace it with an alternative narrative? Judt advocates being relentless in making clear how mindless and destructive the "fantasies" offered by the Right are, and how economically and ethically flawed they are. He recommends that we be similarly relentless in talking about, and outlining fully and consistently the benefits of, a more collective and egalitarian and inclusive society. We agree, and would add that the creation of such a society is not mere "pie in the sky": Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden – consistently lead Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. on virtually all indicators of social and economic wellbeing. The superior performance in these countries reflects a strong commitment to social democratic principles and robust trade union movements. Greater equality and inclusiveness, justified for reasons as much ethical as economic, is an alternative frame that can find resonance with Canadians because it connects with Canadian values, and because it can build a better future for all of us.

Judt's point is: let's talk about such alternatives!

*Errol Black and Jim Silver
CCPA-MB board members*



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