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*Press for  
Conversion!*

*191 James St.  
Ottawa ON  
K1R 5M6  
(new address)*

**Web:** <http://coat.ncf.ca>

**Email:** [overcoat@rogers.com](mailto:overcoat@rogers.com)



Dear reader,

*Press for Conversion!* is back. Issue #68 introduces a theory of social control and social change that tries to make sense of Canada's centuries-long history of mass civilian captivity—from the physical confinement of reservations and internment camps to the enslaving myths and narratives that continue to define and constrain us.

Researching this issue has been an eye-opening experience. The process has forced me to question and even reject some of my beliefs about Canadian history. In particular, I've had to revise my understanding of the role played by progressives in shaping our collective history. For more than 50 years, starting in the 1950s, my parents were engaged in many struggles for peace and social justice. And, as activists working within Canada's social democratic tradition, they passed on this movement's respect for such revered Social Gospel heroes as Rev. J.S. Woodsworth, the illustrious founder and long-time first leader of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the party that gave birth to the NDP in 1961. Fortunately, I was also raised with a healthy skepticism of mainstream politics and religion, by parents who embraced the socialist Waffle movement within the NDP, and the atheist strain within the Unitarian religion.

This issue of COAT's magazine looks at some of the systemic abuses inflicted on Aboriginal peoples, non-western Europeans and radical socialists, who were framed as obstacles to the progress of Canada's nation-building project. Also examined are the captivating narratives of the Social Gospel movement, and those of J.S. Woodsworth in particular, which were instrumental in justifying Canada's state-sponsored programs of cultural genocide and mass civilian internment.

Canada's history is filled with examples of proud citizens who averted their gaze and stood by with folded arms, as criminal programs—like kidnapping and forced confinement in Indian residential schools—were carried out in their name. It is also the story of progressives who rolled up their sleeves and took leading roles to promote, administer and cover up this genocide, because they convinced themselves that what they were doing was right. *In short, it is the story of good people doing bad things for all the right reasons.*

This tragic pattern of history continues to repeat itself. For example, many mainstream peace, human rights, development groups and political parties—including the Liberals, Conservatives, NDP and Greens—are pushing a Canadian-inspired, UN doctrine called the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P). For years, this Liberal government-sponsored initiative has been used to promote US- and NATO-led bombing missions, invasions, occupations and regime changes that have been disguised to look like humanitarian operations. Meanwhile, R2P has been denounced by those who see it is an effort to institutionalise the age-old process of creating publicly-acceptable pretexts to camouflage imperial wars as if they were being waged to defend the poor victims of oppression. As more and more people see through this deceptive smokescreen and denounce R2P for what it is, future generations will be better able to look back on us and say "*What were they thinking? They should have known better!*" Unfortunately, by then it will be too late.

Another so-called peace initiative, pushed by most of the world's top weapons-producing governments, is the benevolent-sounding, UN "Arms Trade Treaty" (ATT). While its goal is to stop what the treaty's state backers call "*illicit*" arms sales, they have no interest in curbing the much-larger, "*legal*" traffic in weapons. The ATT's state sponsors—being the unassailed, global leaders of war profiteering—will continue unabated to wage wars and sell weapons to their repressive, proxy regimes around the world. The important job of inspiring public support for the ATT has fallen to large "non-governmental" groups—many of which are held hostage by major funding from the treaty's government sponsors. These "NGOs" include

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Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Oxfam and the church-based Project Ploughshares. (The latter received at least \$125,000 of their \$3.4 million in government contracts, between 2005 and 2012, to work on the ATT.)

Opposing the so-called “legal” trade in weapons, and the imperial wars they fuel, is—at best—a Sisyphean exercise. This task is made all the more difficult when progressive groups (state-financed or not) become involved in the very processes that they see themselves as opposing. While activists in many movements focus on exposing, lobbying and protesting the excesses of our government and its corporate allies, another approach is also needed. For example, anti-war activists need to take up the very difficult burden of stopping their peace movement colleagues from being drawn into alluring but counterproductive government programs, like R2P and the ATT. The idea that we should raise awareness among fellow progressives may be countered by those who say we are just “preaching to the converted.” Others may react that such efforts are rude or disrespectful to the good work of our fellow activists. But, looking back on our history, would it not have been better if Social Gospellers had opposed their church’s residential schools, instead of supporting this genocide?

Mainstream activists need to face the harsh reality that throughout history, well-meaning people have unwittingly been co-opted into aiding and abetting harmful state programs. In fact, large systemic crimes against peace and humanity are far too complex to be carried out by small, covert groups of deranged sociopaths. Such huge crimes require the participation of many people held hostage within large, highly-respected captive institutions, whether they are working in the hallowed halls of government, within the bounds of a corporate salary or are occupied by some commitment to a higher calling.


Many progressives have been trapped by a national narrative of Canadian exceptionalism that has long portrayed this country as a “Peaceable Kingdom.” All too many are still gripped by the intoxicating, Liberal myth that military “Peace-keeping” will inevitably spread our wholesome “*Canadian values*” abroad. This noble-sounding mission—to “uplift” those less fortunate than ourselves—has deep cultural roots in what many Anglo-Protestant Canadians used to call “*Christian values*.” This missionary approach to cultural assimilation was part of a racist, xenophobic ideology that was used to justify what its proponents described as civilising, Christianising and Canadianising the foreign “strangers within our gates.” This strident ethnocentrism has been useful in convincing progressive Canadians that they are justified in imposing their beliefs and practices on those seen as less developed, and even less human, than themselves: culturally, spiritually and politically.

While individuals can be imprisoned behind bars, walls or barbed wire, and fettered as slaves with chains and manacles, there are far more effective ways of holding large numbers of people in place. The most efficient means of capturing people’s hearts and minds is for institutions to evolve spellbinding narratives that combine a narcissism that flatters their sense of cultural, national or ethnic superiority, with a paranoid view of outsiders. Captive institutions do this by rewarding and promoting those who excel at creating, adapting and disseminating these visions of social identity. The individuals best suited to capture their group’s identity myths, are those who themselves are deeply entranced by the social fictions that they articulate. They soon become the most effective guardians, gatekeepers and spokespeople for their social groups.

Since 1990, *Press for Conversion!* has tried to expose Canadian peace myths. While Canadians love to criticise our warmongering neighbour to the south, and highlight our peaceful image, this requires turning a blind eye to our complicity in many US wars. During the 1990s, the Liberal’s blockaded Iraq with warships, thus helping to kill 1.5 million children under the age of five. Canadians however are more likely to recall the Liberal’s role in banning landmines, which Canada did not produce, export or use. Thus cloaked, the Liberals *increased* Canadian arms exports to the worst warmongers and human-rights abusers around the world. After joining NATO’s “humanitarian bombing” of Yugoslavia in 1999, the Liberals helped install a regime of Afghan warlords in 2001. Through CIDA, the Liberals enlisted peace and development groups to support the 2004 coup and occupation of Haiti which was sold as Canadian peacekeeping. The still-prevailing myth that the Liberals refused to join the Iraq War in 2003 is as ludicrous as the falsehood that they said no to Star Wars in 2005.

Now, with a Liberal government back in power, mainstream peace activists are once again being ensnared in the compelling myths of Canadian exceptionalism. Sincere, well-meaning progressives must guard against falling into new and improved narrative traps that sell war as peace, and brand our nation’s mass social delusions as if they were the gospel truth.

Cheers  
and thanks,

  
Richard Sanders

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