Reflections on My Dubious Experience as a Public Intellectual

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As is often the case when a political scientist is tasked with discussing a modern question such as the transformation of public intellectuals in Canadian democracy, he or she begins with some remarks on the early political scientists, the Greeks. This is not merely a bow to tradition but an attempt to begin with some clear distinctions, distinctions that tend to be blurred or obliterated by modern and contemporary usage. And so I begin with Aristotle.

Aristotle distinguished three ways of life that human beings might choose freely, which is to say, in a manner independent of the necessities of life. Human beings can, moreover, choose to submit, temporarily or forever, to necessity, as do slaves, craftsmen, and money makers (Politics 1337b5). Beyond what he called the banausic ways of life are those that are concerned with the beautiful, which is neither useful nor necessary. More specifically, they are: (1) the life of enjoyment, in which the beautiful is consumed; (2) the life devoted to the polis, in which the practice of arete leads to beautiful and memorable deeds; (3) the life of the philosopher, which is devoted to the contemplation of everlastingly beautiful things (Politics 1333a 30 et seq., 1332b 32). For present purposes, we can ignore the first non-banausic option and look only at what Aristotle called the bios politikos and the bios theoretikos. With the end of the polis, a life of practice lost its specifically political orientation, and the theoretical life thus remained as the only
genuinely free way of life throughout the Middle Ages and into modern times. There are many qualifications that could be made to this distinction between practice and theory or between politics and philosophy, but, like the distinction between war and peace, it is evident enough to serve as a starting place.

This distinction, however qualified, and like all distinctions, is a theoretical one. For the man of action, the contemplative is understood, as Pericles said in his famous funeral oration, to be an idiot—a private person who minds his own business and is, in consequence, politically useless (Thucydides, History 2:40). Why? Because he refuses to undertake noble and beautiful deeds that bring glory to the city. But even here, in this best-known praise of democracy at its best, directed toward a democratic assembly that liked to think well of itself—which is to say, in the flattering words of a democratic politician—action is subordinated to speech, logos. This is so in two ways: first of all, because the glorious deeds of the dead Athenian soldiers were praised by Pericles in words and, second, because Pericles’s glorious words were recorded in a book written by Thucydides, who, I would argue, is a political philosopher avant la lettre.

Consider another example, also from Greek antiquity. In 389 BCE, at about forty years of age, Plato left Athens for extended travels that eventually took him to Sicily. In Syracuse, he formed a friendship with Dion, who was about twenty and was the brother-in-law of the tyrant Dionysius I. When Dionysius I died in 367, Dion sought to influence his nephew, Dionysius II, and help him to reform the government. To that end he asked Plato, who was then about sixty, to return to Syracuse and instruct the new ruler. Plato says he did so reluctantly and with misgivings (Epistles VII, 328b). He had good reason to mistrust the new tyrant. Dionysius II lacked the discipline and commitment necessary to a philosophic life, although he was keen to acquire the appearance of learning and apparently published what he understood of Plato’s philosophy, which was not much. In Plato’s language, Dionysius II was a lover of opinion, a philodoxer, not a philosopher (Republic 480). Or, as Eric Voegelin (2004, 100) once remarked, “what Plato called a philodox[os] we generally term intellectual.” In any event, Dionysius II banished Dion, and Plato left Syracuse for Athens. Dion, still in exile, again appealed to Plato, and he returned, now about sixty-six. Three years later, Dion deposed Dionysius II, and three years after that was killed. Plato’s influence on the unhappy course of Sicilian politics was
negligible. There was a brief interlude of order under Timoleon, starting around 344 BCE, which had some faint echoes of the Platonists’ aspirations, but civil war broke out soon after. Eventually, around 323, this most promising island of Hellenic colonization was conquered by the Carthaginians and later fell to their successors, the Romans.

At the end of his book on intellectuals in politics, Mark Lilla appended an afterword, “The Lure of Syracuse.” This “lure” was perfectly captured by a query of one of Heidegger’s colleagues when, in 1934, he returned to teaching following his tenure as (Nazi) Rektor of the University of Freiburg: “Back from Syracuse?” his colleague asked. Dionysius, Lilla said, “is our contemporary” (Lilla 2001, 194, 196). As the list of intellectuals and the tyrants’ intellectuals admired so eloquently analyzed by Lilla attests, Dionysius has assumed many names today. This is another way of saying, along with Leo Strauss, that Xenophon’s Hiero remains a useful discussion of the relationship of the tyrant and the poet-philosopher. What was new in the twentieth century, Lilla argued, was the advent of what he called the philotyrannical intellectual. Such a creature cannot be found in antiquity, despite the arguments of Strauss’s great interlocutor, Alexandre Kojève. A few major thinkers—besides Heidegger, there was Carl Schmitt, who also admired Hitler, and Georg Lukács, who faithfully followed Stalin—and scores of second- and lower-rank ones, along with poets, professors, and celebrities, made pilgrimages to new Syracuses in Moscow and Berlin, and, more recently, in Hanoi and Havana, or even Tehran.

How philosophically grounded criticism of and opposition to tyranny became the philotyranny of the intellectuals is a large, complex, and puzzling question. A thorough account of the growth of these fleurs du mal even within the smaller Epicurean garden of French intellectual life, with which I am at least somewhat familiar, is beyond the scope of these reflections. Even so, a summary account of changes from the Dreyfus affair, which effectively introduced the term l’intellectuel to modern discourse, would disclose not only an absence of philosophy but a love, precisely, of opinion, doxa (Datta 1999). A great divide, for example, is disclosed between Aron’s L’opium des intellectuels (1955) and Sartre’s Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels (1965). The division was not so much between Plato’s philosopher and philodoxer as between Aron’s bon sens and Sartre’s philotyranny. That is, substantially, Aron was unquestionably correct to consider the opposition, in Aron’s words, of “humanity” and “power,” so central to the critiques of

Barry Cooper 157
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the left following the affair, to be simple-minded—evidence, for example, of Sartre’s refusal, at once naïve and romantic, to confront the realities of twentieth-century politics.

Across the Rhine, as Aron also remarked, the problem was not so much engagement as Innerlichkeit, a kind of internal retreat from political reality in the name of Bildung and Kultur and Wissenschaft. Thomas Mann’s Reflections of an Unpolitical Man, published a month before the 1918 armistice, was probably the locus classicus of this aesthetic attitude toward politics. For Aron, but also for Jürgen Habermas and Eric Voegelin, who otherwise had very little in common, the refusal to confront reality by embracing the escapism of Innerlichkeit was as imprudent as the escapism of French commitment. Moreover, both Aron and Voegelin, who had a great deal in common, stressed the importance of common sense in politics, as did Hannah Arendt.

In other words, from the old distinction of theory and practice we are directed to a kind of hierarchy based, in Platonic terminology, on desire, eros. The desire of the philosopher, we know, is for wisdom and of the politikos for glory. But what do the philotyrannical intellectuals desire? And what do those who desire only the tranquility of Innerlichkeit expect their lives to be like? However those last questions are answered, we must begin with an analysis of common sense.

Philosophically speaking, common sense—as used by Thomas Reid, for instance—refers to the human capability of “managing our own affairs, and [being] answerable for our conduct towards others: this is called common sense because it is common to all men with whom we can transact business, or call to account for their conduct” (Reid 1850, chap. 2, “Of Common Sense,” 332–33). It is, in other words, a habit or attitude rather than philosophically articulate knowledge. As Voegelin (2002, 411) remarked, “the civilized homo politicus need not be a philosopher, but he must have common sense.” Arendt makes the same point, but, as it were, commonsensically: “Common sense occupies such a high rank in the hierarchy of political qualities because it is the one sense that fits into reality as a whole our five strictly individual senses and the strictly particular data they perceive.” The existence of common sense allows us to know that our sense perceptions disclose rather than obscure reality. As Arendt (1958, 208–9) further observes, “A noticeable decrease in common sense in any given community
and a noticeable increase in superstition and gullibility are therefore almost infallible signs of alienation from the world.”

Let us make a preliminary conclusion, then, that at best the thinking of an intellectual, as distinct from that of a scholar or a scientist, to say nothing of a philosopher, aims to be commonsensical. In contrast, scientific, scholarly, and philosophical thinking aims as well to justify the grounds of common sense, namely, those habits of mind that are presupposed or taken for granted by common sense (Schutz 1962, 3).

By this argument, intellectuals were present long before the word was invented. Even more so, public intellectual is a term that, by virtue of certain aspects of their writings, could equally have been applied to scholars, scientists, and philosophers long before the term was coined, apparently in 1987 (Jacoby 1987, 5). Richard Posner (2001) distinguished public intellectuals from scholars, scientists, and philosophers not in terms of the substantive content of their work or whether it was commonsensical but in terms of their rhetoric and their audience.

The question of the public intellectual, Posner (2001, 1) said, refers to “the phenomenon of academics’ writing outside their field or, what often turns out to be the same thing, writing for a general audience.” A few pages later, he wrote:

To an approximation only, the intellectual writes for the general public, or at least for a broader than merely academic or specialist, audience on “public affairs”—on political matters in the broadest sense of that word, a sense that includes cultural matters when they are viewed under the aspect of ideology, ethics, or politics (which may all be the same thing). (23)

And, as a final formulation, he said:

To summarize, a public intellectual expresses himself in a way that is accessible to the public, and the focus of his expression is on matters of general public concern of (or inflected by) a political or ideological cast. Public intellectuals may or may not be affiliated with universities. They may be full-time or part-time academics; they may be journalists or publishers; they may be writers or artists; they may be politicians or officials; they may work for think tanks; they may hold down
“ordinary” jobs. Most often they either comment on current controversies or offer general reflections on the direction or health of society. In their reflective mode they may be utopian in the broad sense of seeking to steer the society in a new direction or denunciatory because their dissatisfaction with the existing state of the society overwhelms any effort to propose reforms. When public intellectuals comment on current affairs, their comments tend to be opinionated, judgmental, sometimes condescending, and often waspish. They are controversialists, with a tendency to take extreme positions. Academic public intellectuals often write in a tone of conscious, sometimes exasperated, intellectual superiority. Public intellectuals are often careless with facts and rash in predictions. (35)

Posner (2001, 26) also accepted the view that public intellectuals filled a market niche that opened up when academics fell under the influence of “continental, mainly French, social theorists” and then adopted “an esoteric, jargon-laden, obscurantist style.” That is, the intellectuals involved may have written about public affairs, but no ordinary member of the public could understand them. By this account, one of the tasks of a public intellectual is to translate, for instance, esoteric postmodern “discourse” into a more persuasive, though not often a commonsensical, idiom.

These aspects of what public intellectuals might aspire to be and how they might be effective was the subject matter of a rather comic exchange in the pages of the Literary Review of Canada. In the December 2010 issue, Sylvia Bashevkin, a self-described “progressive” political scientist at the University of Toronto, lamented the absence of “centre-left voices” from the public discourse of Canadian politics. According to her, there remained within political science but “a relatively narrow, shrunken conduit linking left-of-centre elements of the discipline with the wider general community” (20). She was particularly “troubled” by the fact that “conservative advocates have been better communicators, finding new ways to dress up old ideas such as laissez-faire capitalism and patriarchal family organization in spiffy new outfits for each debating season” (20). In contrast, she lamented of progressives such as herself that “our work is often so theoretically inclined and academically focussed as to be publicly inaccessible” (20).

Her complaint was that the rhetoric of the “progressive” left was defective. Leaving aside the questionable assertions made in passing, Bashevkin’s
major observation is undoubtedly correct. In fact, this short piece in a popular magazine exemplified that regrettable combination of opacity and cliché that both Posner and Jacoby noted as well. What Bashevkin called “theoretically inclined and academically focussed” writing is often pretentious po-mo gibberish. Not for her the advice of George Orwell, to write prose as clear as a windowpane, or even of Kant, who hoped his philosophy could be made intelligible to a plow-boy.

In the next issue, my friend and colleague Tom Flanagan (2011, 30) offered some “helpful hints” on how the “progressive” political scientists might do better. His first and most serious hint was simple: “Learn to write clearly.” This meant, among other things, avoid the locutions of postmodernism and, in particular, the “misguided insistence on using nouns as verbs.” Instead, he said, “Read Hemingway and learn to write short, declarative sentences. Do it. Now.” Other helpful hints followed: discuss topics that citizens actually care about; get involved in political life. He also illustrated in his advice the kind of playfulness that typically serious “progressive” activists deliberately avoid when he noted the need of a plan for world domination: “The Calgary School is now grooming Sarah Palin to be the next president of the United States.” We saw how that worked out. On cue, two readers replied in the next issue with separate letters to berate Flanagan for advocating the building, as he had playfully said, of “a Hayekian Jerusalem in Canada’s green and pleasant land.” One of the two, Erna Paris, a very serious Toronto writer, recalled another bit of levity in which Flanagan indulged on CBC television, namely, his “manly” advice to President Obama that a Predator strike on the founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, whose actions had imperilled the lives of countless Afghans and NATO troops, might be worth considering. Making such a suggestion was, she said, an indictable offence under section 464 of the Criminal Code (Paris 2011, 30). Now, Leo Strauss once observed, in his discussion of Xenophon’s rather subtle way of writing, that there is little more tedious than explaining a joke to someone with no sense of humour. Likewise, no one could reasonably expect serious “progressive” academics to see the comedy in their own actions and words.

To summarize these preliminary observations, the philosophical insights of intellectuals are limited. By and large, they can aspire no higher than to common sense—and often aim lower. In “Evil by Any Other Name,” Christopher Hitchens (2011) made much the same point: “The proper
task of the ‘public intellectual’ might be conceived as the responsibility to introduce complexity into the argument: the reminder that things are very infrequently as simple as they can be made to seem.” A good example of complexity, to which I will return, is climate change. “But,” Hitchens added, “never, ever ignore the obvious either.” Hitchens was referring to the attacks of 11 September 2001: the complexity provided by conspiracy theories served scant purpose there. The offering of commonsensical advice such as this is supplemented by the need, as Flanagan said, to write or speak in a way that audiences understand. Hitchens’s prose is in this respect exemplary.

The philosophical version of this approach is Socratic rhetoric. Likewise, there’s no rule against making fun of your opponents or making the occasional joke. Again, the philosophical version of this approach is Socratic irony. It seems to me that no one who is aware that one of the constituent elements of philosophy is comedy could ever be lured by philotyrannical temptations. Such temptations hold appeal only to those who are serious—and they, as Johan Huizinga (1955) recalled, are devoid of both culture and civility. In short, I am suggesting that it is possible to act as a public intellectual in Posner’s sense only so long as you retain your common sense and your sense of irony. This remains even more necessary when one writes as a scholar or a philosopher, even a political philosopher. Of course, there are non-commonsensical public intellectuals as well, so there are often conflicts in the media among members of different “schools”—such as Bashevkin’s Progressive School and the presumably non-progressive Calgary School.

The next part of this chapter is a kind of confessional. It is intended to justify the phrase in the title referring to my dubious experiences.

In high school and then as an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia I would write occasional pieces for the student newspaper. At UBC I even dated a reporter for The Ubyssey, who later became a ferocious lawyer in Vancouver. One of my good friends at the time was Mike Valpy, who went on to become a major writer at the Globe and Mail. When I lived in Toronto, I wrote occasional op-ed articles for the Globe. The last one I penned as a resident of that city explained why I was leaving for Calgary.
My editor called it “New Barbarism: The Young Man Goes West” (Cooper 1981). It was published in the “Trends” section. After about a decade of writing intermittently for the *Globe* and for the *Financial Post*, I wrote a longer article titled “Thinking the Unthinkable,” which appeared in a *Globe* supplementary magazine called *West* (Cooper 1990). It was not about the effects of nuclear war, as was Herman Kahn’s book of that name, but about how to help Québec gain independence because of the incessant monetary demands of the province, Quebeckers’ and their government’s sense of entitlement, and their obnoxious lack of gratitude for the largesse Albertans and other productive Canadians had sent their way.

David Bercuson, whom I had met once in Toronto, called me up and suggested we write a book on this problem. I had never written a book for a general audience before and had never engaged an agent to negotiate with publishers and secure an advance, which I had never previously received. It was all very exciting.

The aftermath of the book we produced, *Deconfederation: Canada Without Québec* (1991), was also exciting. On 5 October 1991, *Deconfederation*, according to the *Globe and Mail*, was the best-selling book in the country. David and I went on book tours. I had the enjoyable experience of speaking *en français* to my erstwhile fellow citizens in Québec to explain why we wanted them gone. The editor of the *Montreal Gazette*, Norman Webster, wrote a threatening editorial denouncing us. We made fun of him as the Ayatollah Webster. We wrote a sequel, *Derailed: The Betrayal of the National Dream* (1994), but it was not nearly as successful. Writing these books with Bercuson led to a collaboration over several years in which we produced regular newspaper columns for the *Calgary Sun*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *Calgary Herald*. In addition, and starting with that initial book tour promoting *Deconfederation*, I have regularly been interviewed for radio and television.

By Posner’s understanding, this production of more-or-less popular books and newspaper writing, along with electronic media appearances, counts as an activity certifying one as a public intellectual. Fair enough. But such a category does not address the actual experience of writing such material. Here I would have to add that, invariably, there exists an element of entertainment and provocation in writing for a general audience. That is, for one who has at least a remote understanding of philosophy, writing for non-philosophers and for human beings who do not aspire even to
become aware that they are non-philosophers, let alone do something about it, necessarily emphasizes the comic side of the philosophical way of life. One cannot avoid irony under those circumstances.

There are also occasions when irony is thrust upon you whether you seek it or not. Apart from my experience at a think tank, which should more accurately be called a dogma tank, and of which I have written elsewhere (Cooper 2009, 247–57), twice I have been the object of attention in the media in a way that I did not seek. These occasions, too, constitute important elements of my dubious experience as a public intellectual.2

During the 1980s, the Government of Alberta made money available to hire research assistants. They were called, for reasons I can no longer recall, PEP grants and STEP grants. Professors were urged to apply in order to support our students. Having secured three months support for four students, I asked one of my MA students, Lydia Miljan, to design a research program to put them to work. She had them do a content analysis of CBC national network radio programs, including such flagship productions as As It Happens and Morningside, starring Barbara Frum and Peter Gzowski, respectively. Lydia was working on politics and the media, so it was also on-the-job training for her. The team developed a code book, protocols for resolving disagreements over coding and for monitoring inter-coder reliability, and so on. I had very little input into the whole process. Lydia and I then wrote a paper for the next Canadian Political Science Association meeting presenting the data. The data revealed, and we attempted to account for, a persistent left-wing bias and a kind of enduring animus against the western parts of the country.

We left a few copies of the paper in the press room, and, much to our surprise, it made the front page of the Globe next morning, below the fold. Lydia, who now teaches at the University of Windsor, thought this was amusing. Neither of us expected the flurry of letters to the editor denouncing our findings. Perhaps the letter-writers had read the paper, perhaps not. We replied, restating our findings, and the disturbance subsided.

Back in Calgary, toward the end of the summer of 1987, so far as I can recall, I received a letter from Norm Wagner, the president of the university at the time. Wagner was a scholar of the ancient Near East as well as a dynamic administrator, and he had a wonderful sense of humour. He had received a letter from the president of the CBC, Pierre Juneau, demanding that I be fired. “Would you care to draft a reply?” Wagner asked. I did.
Moreover, I was curious about the, to me, strange sensitivity of the journalists and bureaucrats at the CBC. We had not set out to attack them but to discover whether a vague sense of imbalance in their news and magazine shows could be measured using a well-known and long-accepted method of content analysis. Personally, I was not astonished by what we found, and the interesting problem was how to account for both the left-wing bias and the central Canadian bias of CBC news coverage. Some of this problem I worked out later in discussing the several competing regional myths at play in Canada, but my immediate response was to write a book that further documented the shoddy job done by the CBC, *Sins of Omission: Shaping the News at CBC TV* (1994). A few years later, Lydia and I rewrote her PhD thesis, which examined the political attitudes of journalists, both print and electronic, in Canada (Cooper and Miljan 2003). This book was runner-up for the Donner Prize for the best book in public policy. In all modesty, we ought to have won.3

I would emphasize, however, that I did not set out to study the media and their influence on politics as part of my political science research agenda. This work was simply occasioned by the availability of funding, which provided a means to support students over the summer, which led to the paper, which chanced to encounter an interested journalist, who brought it to the attention of a Globe editor, who publicized our findings. Who could have anticipated the response of Pierre Juneau or the people at the CBC responsible for showing how balanced the organization was? Having been attacked by CBC, however, and then having that organization’s CEO write the president of my university asking that I be fired, I felt that a thymotic response on my part was appropriate, as well as satisfying. In fact, I was never concerned about getting fired, but I was curious and suspicious about the CBC. Why did they object so strenuously to an outsider examining their work? Could the bias that the students’ content analysis brought to light be systemic? In my more suspicious moments I wondered, What are they hiding? And why? Curiosity led me to write *Sins of Omission* and some further papers, as well as to help Lydia turn a very interesting thesis into a more accessible examination of the attitudes of Canadian journalists and document the influence of those attitudes on the production of news.

There is an accidental aspect to the second event as well. When the Chrétien government signed the Kyoto Protocol in December 1997, it reversed initial commitments made to the provinces, especially to Alberta,
that they would be consulted regarding the provisions of this agreement. At the time, I thought this was just run-of-the-mill treachery from Ottawa, but it soon became apparent that the increase in the reach of the federal bureaucrats was advanced in the name of climate science, global warming, anthropogenic climate change, the production of greenhouse gases, and so on. To my way of looking at federal politics, it was an updated version of the National Energy Program initiated by Pierre Trudeau during the early 1980s.

Even in the late 1990s, it was clear that the issues surrounding the actual causes of climate change were not settled but hotly disputed by the climatologists; it seemed to me that the bureaucrats in Environment Canada were being highly selective in what they considered to be scientifically acceptable. Of course, this is not surprising. Bureaucrats are not likely to look for reasons to diminish their own power. In any event, the more I looked into Kyoto and the justification for it, the more it looked as if federal bureaucratic politics, not science and the debates among climate scientists, was driving the Ottawa agenda.

In the summer of 2004, one of my friends in business introduced me to several individuals, mostly retired geologists and geophysicists, who had formed a group called “Friends of Science” (FOS). They were concerned to promote discussion of the data, models, conclusions, measurement problems, and so on relating to climate science, meteorology, and climatology. We held a number of meetings, and I explained my interest in the politics of the debate about anthropogenic global warming, as it was then called. In the fall of 2004, I set up a project, “Research on the Climate-Change Debate,” and, in collaboration with FOS, an associated trust account to receive funds that would pay for the production of a DVD documenting the many complexities of the climate-science debate and would also be used to publicize the existence of the DVD. My thinking was, and is, that the media’s presentation of the problem of climate change, particularly in the early 2000s, was one-sided and that the political consequences for Alberta and for Canada were significant. To my way of thinking, producing a DVD was akin to writing a book; publicizing its existence was akin to publishing a book. After all, there is not much point in writing a manuscript or making a DVD if no one knows it exists.

The production, distribution, and publicizing of a DVD is an expensive operation. In this instance, the whole thing cost slightly more than half a million dollars. Contributions to the trust account, which was administered
by the university, came from individuals, foundations, and companies; donors were given tax receipts because, in the eyes of the Canada Revenue Agency, the University of Calgary is a registered charity. This was the same administrative structure I had used for many other research projects.

In the early spring of 2005, the DVD was released and remains available on the FOS web site. Initially, it had the University of Calgary logo on it, in order, I presumed, to acknowledge the collaboration with the university. A couple of days later, on 5 May 2005, FOS received a letter from the university lawyer instructing FOS to remove the name and logo of the university from the DVD or face legal action. The reasons given by the university were “that it did not support the position set out in the video, that it had not entered into any affiliation agreement with FOS,” and that the Board of Governors had not approved the use of the U of C’s coat of arms or crest. It was certainly true that the Board of Governors had not approved anything, and the identifying symbols were removed. It was not clear to me what an “affiliation agreement” was other than the standard agreement supplied by Research Services to administer research funds accumulated in the usual way in a trust account. So far as “the position set out in the video” is concerned, what it set out was a respectable and scientifically well-qualified argument to the effect that the view reported widely in the media, namely, that something approaching a consensus existed on the question of global warming, was wrong. At the time, the significance of the response of the university escaped me.

Meanwhile, a blogger and public relations consultant based in Vancouver and affiliated with the David Suzuki Foundation began posting the most alarming reports, most of which concerned my being a “conduit” for money from “big oil” to produce propaganda for my good friend and “fishing buddy” Stephen Harper. For the record, none of this is true: (1) I was not a conduit for anything; I was an account holder of research money; (2) we received money from one medium-sized oil and gas company, Talisman Energy, about which I will have more to say (unfortunately, “big oil” contributed nary a cent); (3) it is a great exaggeration to say that the prime minister and I are good friends, notwithstanding my qualified admiration for his achievements as compared to his predecessors, and so far as I know he does not fish. None of this mattered because the focus was on the FOS video and the doubt it cast on the fantasy that the science surrounding anthropogenic climate change was conclusive and “settled.”
Someone, identified only as “a citizen,” complained to the university about the project and the video, alleging that it was an illegal and illegitimate operation. The allegation of illegality concerned radio advertisements drawing attention to the contested state of climate science that were aired in Ontario during the 39th federal general election in the fall of 2005. The illegitimacy, apparently, concerned the content of the FOS video. Regarding the legal question, the issue concerned “third-party spending,” which is prohibited by section 353 of the Canada Elections Act. I had, in fact, served as an expert witness, for the Crown, in the third-party spending cases brought against the National Citizens Coalition led at the time by my alleged fishing buddy, Stephen Harper. Before FOS negotiated with radio stations in Ontario about running the ads, I told them that, in the event of an election (it had not yet been called, but there was considerable speculation during the summer and early fall), the content of the ads would not violate the Canada Elections Act because it did not endorse any political party. I was right. Three years later, in response to this citizen’s complaint, Elections Canada issued a ruling to that effect.

This leaves the question of the significance of the content of the FOS video. At the time, I was simply puzzled about why the university—which had several times provided a forum for David Suzuki, and awarded him an honorary degree, and later co-sponsored an appearance in Calgary by Al Gore—would not dismiss the complaint with some high-sounding talk about academic freedom. What are universities for, after all, if not to discuss all sides of controversial questions? Indeed, Allison MacKenzie, the university’s director of community relations, agreed that bringing Gore to town was controversial, “but the university is a place to discuss different ideas, and climate change is a hugely important issue.” So important was this issue that the university set aside twenty tickets to reward students who developed ideas on how to make the campus “more sustainable” and greener (Anderson 2007).

One of the oddities about the discussion of anthropogenic climate change is that the “skeptics,” as they are called, tend to be dismissed by what we might call the orthodox. For anyone even slightly familiar with the history of science, skepticism seems to be one of the few constants. Why is climate change so different? One answer seems plausible. The response to criticism of the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to the United Nations or to such comic episodes as the hacking of
computers in the United Kingdom and the publicizing of some embarrassingly unscientific emails suggests that, within the orthodox community of climate scientists, great value is accorded political solidarity. That is, the debate regarding climate change is first of all political rather than scientific, rather like the exclusion of Alberta’s interests and Alberta’s voice from the Kyoto “process.”

The immediate effect, however, was rather different. I was summoned to a meeting with the provost, the university lawyer, the vice-president for research, and the chief fundraiser for the university. I was asked to explain myself, which is what I did along the lines just indicated. I was told that the university was shutting down the research accounts because I had violated several rules, which was news to me.5 The upshot was that a cheque from the Calgary Foundation, which was going to produce an updated version of the original DVD, was to be returned to them. It was also clear from the conversation that these senior managers were most unhappy with me. One of them went so far as to suggest that I would be liable for some $30,000 that the university had spent on legal and accounting advice. They were not amused when I said that perhaps FOS could pick up the tab. That evening I spoke to one of my genuine fishing buddies, a much-admired (and feared) litigator. He wrote the university lawyer and received the reply that it was all a great misunderstanding.

This was as curious an episode as the response of the CBC, only this time it was the university, not the public broadcaster, that was the source of the threats. So what, in turn, was the threat posed by the FOS DVD? As Hitchens advised: Do not ignore the obvious. A plausible principle might therefore be found by bearing in mind the following: by analogy with “big oil,” where “big science” is concerned, the old adage of detectives, “Follow the money,” may be correct.

Because the correspondence between the university and several funding agencies involved is not public, all one can do is note that the university has received a great deal of money to support infrastructure and personnel working in two organizations the premise of which is that anthropogenic climate change is a genuine threat and that the FOS video cast that premise into doubt. These organizations are the Institute for Sustainable Energy, Environment, and Economy (ISEEE) and the Canada School of Energy and Environment (CSEE). They conduct research on such questions as carbon capture and sequestration (CCS), for example, which assumes not only that
CO₂ is a significant “greenhouse gas” which is questionable, that it is produced by humans, which is true, but that it is the chief cause of potentially catastrophic climate change, just as Al Gore and the IPCC have said, which is even more questionable. The numbers are impressive: press reports indicate the ISEEE is in the process of receiving hundreds of millions of dollars (Alberta Energy 2011; Cryderman 2011; Lowery 2004).

The CSEE story is even more interesting not so much because of the money at stake (though that is considerable) but because of the colourful individuals involved. The initial memorandum of understanding, which established the CSEE as a joint venture among the three largest Alberta universities and the Government of Canada, was signed in 2004. This MOU was followed by others in 2007 and 2008. In 2008, Bruce Carson was appointed executive director and in 2009 the funding agreement was extended to 2013–14.

According to Andrew Nikiforuk, writing in The Tyee (Nikiforuk 2011), which is to say, a strong environmentalist writing in a strongly environmentalist paper, Bruce Carson, despite his questionable past and the somewhat lurid scandals that later surrounded him, managed to secure over $30 million in funding for CSEE. Carson was, at the time, Harper’s senior policy advisor. When asked by the Calgary Herald about Carson’s criminal record, a university spokesperson refused to discuss “second or third hand information” (quoted in Nikiforuk 2011). Much of the information regarding Carson was in fact not gossip, however, but part of the public record.

In any case, it is not Carson’s character that deserves attention in the present context. Rather, as Nikiforuk reported, it is that the university actually was lobbying the Government of Canada, whereas FOS was merely accused of having done so but in fact had not.

The latest chapter in the FOS-university story appeared in mid-September 2011, when Mike De Souza, who had written several earlier stories in the Calgary Herald about the video and my part in securing its production, wrote a couple more stories after having learned from a freedom of information request that one of the sponsors of the original project was Talisman Energy (De Souza 2011a, 2011b). He was particularly interested to report that Talisman now disavowed their previous support for FOS (De Souza 2011c). The interesting aspect of this story is not the allegation that research money was used for lobbying, which was not true; it is the curious fact that, of all the CEOs in the major and junior oil and gas companies in
Calgary, only one, Talisman, ever gave serious money to this project. One reason for this oddity, it seems to me, is that most oil and gas companies are run by engineers or MBAs or engineers with MBAs. Talisman, at the time, was run by Jim Buckee, who had a PhD in astrophysics from Oxford. In other words, Buckee was a scientist as well as a manager. When he spoke about climate change and associated topics, he spoke the way genuine scientists do, with a fiduciary concern for truth.

To conclude, let me cite one final comic episode. On 15 September 2011, in an editorial titled “Ethics 101” written in the wake of the latest revelations concerning the connection of FOS and the University of Calgary, the Ottawa Citizen opined that “it is not the role of the university to lend its legitimacy, good name—and possibly, donation tax receipts—to a lobbying campaign, funded in part by a company with a direct interest in the issue, and aimed at presenting the results of scientific research in a particular light.” Of course, the university administration and celebrated researchers, not FOS, had been doing just that for several years. The lobbying was a success and the university was handsomely rewarded for it.

There are a few conclusions that can be drawn from these reflections. The first is that whether one becomes a public intellectual is in no small measure a matter of contingency. Second, those who are sometimes called celebrity journalists (who are, perhaps, just individuals with PhDs who are unable to find academic employment) might seek such a status for the monetary rewards it brings. Here, my own experience cannot really serve as an example since the rewards have been relatively meager compared to my regular employment as a university teacher. (Notwithstanding the fact that environmentalist bloggers think I am a lackey and shill for big oil, I still have a substantial mortgage to pay.) That said, I do not think I would write a newspaper column for free. George Grant once remarked that it was a matter of vanity to hope that one’s views will have an effect. There is something to his observation, but that is not the whole story. One hopes that one’s views will be effective in teaching, say, Plato’s Republic not just because they are one’s own interpretations but also because what Plato says is true.
It seems to me that, one way or another, we cannot avoid the question of truth. I mentioned that this was probably why Jim Buckee, a scientist, responded to the climate change alarmism by principled action whereas the ordinary CEO today is more likely to manage a disturbance by buying some tranquility rather than, as the Bible says, “kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:5). Finally, I would say that a combination of common sense, a reasonable rhetorical style, and a sense of the absurd or of irony is necessary for life as a public intellectual in Canada today. Such at least is my experience.

Notes

1 For anyone who has read Hayek and grasped his notion of spontaneous order, the echo from Blake’s poem was a line of wit. Progressives seem not to have got the joke, but whether it was from ignorance of Hayek or of Blake is not clear.

2 There is a third and minor occasion as well, to which Flanagan adverted: the Calgary School. This, too, is an ironic label foist upon Bercuson, Flanagan, and me, along with Ted Morton and Rainer Knopff, by journalists who think that ideas are more important than interests or ambitions in politics. Even more specifically, it was a convenient portmanteau term that allowed Toronto and other eastern and left-wing journalists and bloggers to make sense of the success, otherwise unintelligible to them, of Stephen Harper. For such intellectuals, Harper was a creature of the Calgary School, which makes as much sense as saying Dionysius was a creature of Platonic philosophy. An especially comic rendition of this tale is Marci McDonald, “The Man Behind Stephen Harper” (2004).

3 Granted, both these books were published by university presses and so might be disqualified from contributing to any public intellectual profile. However, the narcissism of media ensured that they received extensive media attention, so I include them.

4 In fact, I set up two trust accounts. The second was to comply with the conditions of a donor who wished to ensure that his funds were used only for the production of the DVD and not for ancillary matters, such as publicity.

5 A report by the university auditor found that there was insufficient oversight, which is probably true. But then such people have a vocational commitment to the proposition that you can never have too much oversight. There was no serious wrongdoing, however, although I did violate some minor provisions of reporting.
References


