

B.C. HYDRO and the B.C. GOVERNMENT: WEALTH AND POWER HAVE MADE THEM BULLIES

by Richard Caniell

We have had, personified in the extortionate policies of BC Hydro, abetted by the Liberal government, an example of the pivots on which these two function: money and power. Their policies revolve around the systemization and rationalization of ruthless greed as public policy, embodied by the half-million dollar yearly salaries of BC Hydro top executives, and the six-figure salaries of BC's MLAs. Wealth, power, and all their accoutrements, have formed a shield of shocking indifference to the consequences of their policies on the electorate.

Energy Minister Bill Bennett continues to acknowledge that the Liberal government *blocked* the oversight powers of the BC Utilities Commission (BCUC), "unplugging it from major decisions that included the Site C dam, Northwest Transmission Line, smart meters and hydro rate policies." (*The Province*, Feb. 5, 2015)

While the BCUC was "unplugged", the government passed the 2010 *Clean Air Act* that forced Smart Meters on an unwitting public. The Liberals and BC Hydro then began their bullying tactics against anyone who resisted a Smart Meter, forcing on them punitive "Legacy" fees and turning their electricity off, even in winter, if they refused to pay.

When a government seizes the power to exercise complete control, a devastating arrogance emerges that can grow demented with punishing anyone who opposes it. This imbalance can be seen when Hydro turns people's power off for an unpaid Legacy bill of less than \$100, even though they have paid their electricity bill in full. If they wish it turned back on, they *must* accept a Smart Meter and pay \$355.00, and potentially a \$200.00 security deposit.

Even while Hydro knows your power is shut off, and you've spent months in the cold and dark trying to get by with an expensive generator, Hydro continues to send you bills for the Legacy fee, ostensibly for a meter reader, though there is nothing on the meter to read.

This is precisely what happened to Craig Pettitt. On the 21st of November, Hydro shut off his power. Unbelievably, Hydro still sent someone to read the meter, even though there was nothing to read. In January he received a bill for two months of "Legacy" fees, totaling \$68.40. The bill showed no charge for power, because it was cut off.

Many people in the province feel that BC Hydro and the government are collaborating in what amounts to extortion. It is not strange at all that criminals seem to have adopted Hydro's approach. In the *Vancouver Sun* (Jan. 23, 2015), the RCMP reported a scam involving persons posing as BC Hydro employees telephoning businesses, claiming that large amounts of money are owed by the customer. The callers demand payment by money-order within one hour, or their electricity will be turned off. Fraud artists are disguising themselves as BC Hydro, but in reality, Hydro is copying a criminal approach: frank extortion based on misrepresented facts.

When faced with complaints about over-charging, Hydro laments that it has to pay huge sums to the provincial government, which pays the costs of schooling, social welfare and health. Yet we all know the government has been slashing its aid to all those programs, while at the same time it pays itself, with taxpayer sums, handsome salaries, and even rewards Liberals who lose their elections.

Insulation of mega paycheques

Neither the Liberals, nor BC Hydro, have made any response when I have placed before them the portrait of people's electricity being shut off in winter. Evidently they are too insulated to hear it. And what is this insulation that makes them unable to feel the hardships and injustices they are inflicting on others?

BC Hydro's Vice President, Greg Reimer, who is head of the Smart Meter program, makes a salary of approximately \$42,000 per month, receiving a total annual package of \$503,161. Premier Clark, poor thing, only gets \$23,180 per month.

The avalanche of taxpayer money paid to the Liberals is staggering. In 2013 the Canadian Taxpayers Federation reported that the pensions of all MLAs who did not win or seek re-election that year could top \$26 million dollars. The pensions of many of these politicians since leaving office range from \$68,000 to \$90,000 yearly, paying them between one and one-and-a-half million dollars over their lifetimes.

This huge insulation of wealth has sealed the vision and hearts of all these politicians to the midwinter shut off of electricity for sums below \$500, and often no more than \$100. To those who have the effrontery to refuse payment of Hydro's falsified, punitive and extortionate penalty of \$32.40 a month, the decree is "Shut off their electricity!" This is our era's corollary to royalty shouting in previous centuries "Off with their heads!"

We read, in shock, the portrait of debtor's prisons and workhouses, with their dangerous and exhausting treadmills, of the 19th century. They were punishments for owing some few hundred dollars in their impoverished lives while the upper class, stuffed with comforts and excess, went about, like Scrooge, believing sanctimoniously that the punishments they had formulated were justified and in balance with the crime of not paying in entirety a sum that is owed.

Indifference of the Opposition

Roused by an avalanche of protests after ignoring these extortionate factors for the better part of a year, Adrian Dix finally sent out a press release objecting to the artificially high and punitive fees for refusing the Smart Meter. Dix has conspicuously failed to object to Hydro shutting off people's electricity (in mid-winter yet!), but if the Hydro opt-out fees are too high and punitive, how can shutting off one's electricity for refusing to pay it be acceptable?

Using such tactics in any season is a reprehensible and highly exaggerated response to those who, paying their electricity bills, refuse to pay Hydro's penalty for not accepting their health endangering meters. Let Hydro sue these people so their victims can present in court the documentation for their resistance. Then they can present the scientific documentation supporting their refusal to accept the Smart Meter or pay the fee.

Neither Dix nor NDP leader Horgan have replied to the articles I have been sending them, or made a public statement turlly denouncing the electricity disconnections. Scrooge himself would be delighted by this, but one wonders:

- Why did Mr. Dix's letter to Bennett and the BC government fail to object to the mid-winter electricity cutoffs?
- Has Mr. Dix investigated the claims of medical doctors and scientists warning

against Smart Meter frequencies and found them invalid?

- Has Mr. Dix decided that thrusting men, women and children into the unlit and unheated cold of mid-winter is a justifiable penalty for persons refusing to pay an artificially and purposely inflated penalty fee?

- Given the formerly staunch opposition to the fees by the NDP leader, Mr. Horgan, why isn't he in front deploring these objectionable tactics, especially the electricity cutoffs?

Nowhere do the NDP's responses match the gravity of the danger. Our hopes for improved community, and a society not founded on greed for profits and status, are being ground down by a concentration of material power and gross indifference to any other aims. And those who are made callous and indifferent to this become emotional and moral paupers, whatever the half million dollar salaries they take home. The arrogance and indifference shown by Hydro, supported by the present government, and the ineptitude and weakness of the party in opposition, are setting dynamite at the foundation of the democracy we thought governed us.

The President and Vice President of Hydro ignore all the deplorable facts I cite and go on in their yearly salaries of half a million dollars, with their vacation pay of \$20,000 to \$40,000, safe in their warm, well-lit homes, evidently having their hearts replaced with dollar signs. I'm outraged by their indifference, steaming mad that these punishments could be meted out to individuals who have scientific and medical reports to justify their resistance, and few there are, with the power to intervene, who do anything at all in the defence of those so affected. What kind of society is being rebuilt all around us?

Society is Debased by a Morally Deranged Corporate Bully

We all are concerned with the emergence of widespread and ugly bullying, usually by a bigger person of a smaller one. The studies of this tell us that the bystanders who watch the bully beat up a weaker or smaller individual are part of the bully's empowerment: that they do not interfere with the bully represents their approval.

In school situations, some administrations feel that they can't intervene, that this must be worked out between the kids; thus some teachers ignore bullying — inadvertently supporting the bully. Is there any difference when it is a corporate bully like Hydro, beating up those who resist or dislike what it is doing by shutting off their electricity while the BC government ignores it?

Explain to me why there is all this stated concern about how we must not aid the school yard bully by fear, complacency or indifference, yet when the societal bully runs amok, we ignore it. Doesn't this situation — going on month after month, seep down into the pith and marrow of society, debasing it with the contradictions the bullies insist we swallow?

People who aren't concerned about the health risks of Smart Meters, or who can afford the opt-out fees, may have their own indifference to the plight of those who do not want them. But the government's thirst for profits at any cost are a danger, not only to people in the dark and cold, but to everyone who believes we live in a humane and democratic society.

Auditor General of Ontario Warns of Insufficient Security of Smart Meter data

Fears that Smart Meters represent a corporate invasion into the privacy of our homes, and could facilitate further economic exploitation of those who have them, have been confirmed by no less an authority than the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, in its 2014 annual report. The report states:

"Smart meters enable the collection of massive amounts of personal electricity-use data ... The smart-meter data could reveal when people are , daily routines and changes in those routines. As a result, electricity-use patterns could be mined, for example, for marketing and advertising purposes ... In Ontario, about 800 distribution company employees and/or their agents have access to specific functions ... that include viewing and editing meter data ... from any computer connected to the Internet."

The corporate/governmental rush to have such access has left Smart Meter users vulnerable to theft. According to the Auditor General's report, employees who left utility companies *did not have their access to the data revoked in a timely manner, and the Independent Electricity System Operator had no jurisdiction, nor ability to review those to whom the utility companies granted access.*

There is an old and just saying, that "The limits of tyrants are shaped by the endurance of those whom they oppress." People today are becoming more and more conditioned to accept less and less control over their lives. With funds for social programs, education, health and housing for the displaced and poor repeatedly cut or inadequate, we accept that the executives of a public corporation, drawing on taxpayer funds, should take home \$42,000 a month and other perks. We accept their abuse of due process in suspending the oversight powers of the BC Utilities Commission. We accept that our best MLAs offer only limited and belated protests and observations of the situation, and many of us turn a glazed eye to warnings that smart meters make us vulnerable to economic exploitation and theft. Meanwhile, a cancerous spread of ego-ridden corporate avarice has brought us to the point that 1% of the population owns 50% of the planet's wealth, while poverty and gross necessity plague every part of society.

I believe there is more to all of us than this, which is why I'm writing all this. There are, increasingly, many individuals who are part of a circuit of people whose concerns are warmly, actively, generous. This is a light in the cruel, cold dark of selfishness, and a resistance to a society shaped by the misrepresented goal of economic progress, a fine name for a vile, increasingly destructive aim. I've now been told that up to 250,000 households in BC refused a Smart Meter before the Legacy fee was implemented. And 59 municipalities passed resolutions against Smart Meters.

The conduct of BC Hydro and the government, the support for their tactics, maintained by an outward indifference to its vicious inequities, is at the cost of all that is sympathetic, generous and humane. I hope that eventually an outpouring of outrage and objection floods Hydro, the government and media. They have earned it.