



the mysterious east meets the senate committee on poverty

“somebody must be right”

ON OCTOBER 28, 1969, the Senate of Canada constituted a Special Committee. The Committee, formed by a special motion of Senator David A. Croll (who, of course, became its chairman) was set up *to investigate and report upon all aspects of poverty in Canada, whether urban, rural, regional or otherwise, to define and elucidate the problem of poverty in Canada, and to recommend appropriate action to ensure the establishment of a more effective structure of remedial measures.*

That committee has been in existence for over a year now, and its final report is about due to be published. What can the public of Canada expect from the expenditure of money involved in sending the Committee's sixteen member Senators and their entourage -- secretaries, stenographers, staff, equipment -- back and forth across Canada in this a series of safaris? Aside from its literary qualities, what can we expect in the way of new insights into the problems of poor people of Shippegan or Fogo expect from this newest expedition into the uncharted wilds of social investigation?

Probably not a hell of a lot.

There is little doubt that after appropriate deliberation the Committee will solemnly deliver itself of the old chestnut: the only solution to poverty in Canada is a guaranteed annual income. So what else is new.

The point is that however well intentioned the Senators may be they are not prepared by birth or circumstance to take any meaningful look at the plight of poor. Think about it this way. If you wanted to set up a committee but guarantee that it would learn nothing new, contact no impoverished citizens on any meaningful level, and produce at best obvious commonplaces as its report, what would you do?

Probably you would staff it with people who are as far from poor as it's possible to get -- half of them would be genuine aristocracy (people whose grandparents made the money and acquired the social status) and half “self-made men” (people who have made it themselves from the status of immigrant or lower class to a comfortable affluence, and who can't understand why the poor, too, can't make it if they'd just go out and get a job). You would make sure the committee was as old as possible - past retirement age, if at all possible. This would assure both that they would not have the energy necessary to attend all of the Committee meetings much less get out and talk to people, and that they would be less receptive to new ideas.

You would also try to staff it with people very aware of their own dignity, and very defensive about “affronts” to it. Very conscious of order and respect, easily offended by breaches of either, and very articulate in expressing such umbrage.

You would then move the committee back and forth across the country as fast and erratically as possible, on the grounds that most poor people are less aware of current events than the rest of society and thus would probably never know of the committee's presence in their area. You would try and hold meetings in the cities in areas where most poverty is rural, and outside the cities where urban poverty dominates. You would attempt to place the meetings in affluent and/or inaccessible areas of the city.

You would assure that no one illiterate or nearly so could get to the committee (even if he happened to hear about it) by insisting that written briefs be submitted. You would assure that no one who didn't belong to some upward striving

group or community organization could get to the committee by insisting that the briefs be duplicated and distributed two weeks in advance (long before the papers begin printing stories about the committee's imminent arrival).

Finally, wherever the hearings were held, you would try to arrange the most intimidating physical arrangement possible. Ideally, you would have a raised dais (three feet at least) with a long, cloth-covered table like an altar on it, with the committee stationed behind it like ikons -- so that

The best way of knowing how well the committee measures up to this ideal of uselessness and waste is to look at the way they conduct their hearings. *THE MYSTERIOUS EAST* was in a good position to do so last summer, when, by invitation of the committee staff, we agreed to present a brief to the committee. This is a record of what happened.

THE *MYSTERIOUS EAST* HAD NO INTENTION of presenting a brief to the Senate Poverty Committee -- did not, in fact, know that they were holding hearings in Moncton in August. But when a staff member of the Committee called the magazine a week before the hearings and explained that they were getting a little response from central New Brunswick and asked us to prepare a brief -- though on short notice -- we agreed to try.

The committee's hearings were held, appropriately enough, in the Moncton Lion's Club Senior Citizens Home. As we had of course not had time to distribute copies of our brief to either the committee members or to the press, our arrival in the hearing room was greeted with a number of requests for copies both of the brief and recent issues of the magazine. We became aware of the nature of the committee hearings first when a voice from behind the long table said, "Come on, now, you didn't come here to peddle papers. We haven't got all day," or words to that effect. We proceeded to the table and were informed that since *The Mysterious East* brief was not on Senator Croll's agenda, we were not going to be allowed to present our brief.

It turned out later that what has happened was that the committee staff had ignored an indication by the Senators that they didn't want to hear from the media in order to invite us, and had smuggled us into the agenda under the Civil Liberties Association. Ignorant of this, we felt a little indignant at having been asked to present a brief and traveling from Fredericton to do so when we were not on the agenda; after some discussion of this, Senator Croll finally allowed the hearing to go ahead, over the objections of Senator Fournier, who accused us of "disrupting" the hearings by "peddling our papers" and insisting on reading our brief.

The brief was read, finally (for extracts from it seeboxes) and we were asked to return that afternoon for a question period. After some hesitation, we agreed.

It became apparent almost immediately, that afternoon, that the central issue in the brief, in the minds of the committee -- and especially Senator Edgar Fournier -- was our attack on the preconceptions embraced by typical senators -- especially Senator Fournier. The brief had quoted form some remarks made by Senator Fournier, not untypical of the Senator, in previous hearings to the effect that thousands of "so-called poor" are defrauding a welfare system which is "the curse of the country" and that "It will be

wasted effort to throw more money to people who cannot control their expenses".

Senator Fournier, then, began the afternoon session with a "speech" which says more than we could say in volume about the Senate Poverty Committee,



Senator Fournier

He began by attacking the members of our delegation personally; ascertaining that some of us were university teachers, he charged:

You are university professors; not lacking in education. You saw fit this morning to walk in and disturb this meeting that had an agenda. You took an hour of our time. You presented a brief which we had not seen. We asked you not to read the brief. You were asked not to distribute your pamphlet and you did. So you cannot blame this type of conduct on a lack of education or ignorance. It is just the attitude you people have.

We, the ignorant group as you may call me or the rest of us, have to worry about what is going on in our universities. God bless the universities when you have professors of your calibre teaching our young people. No wonder we have revolutions, terrorists and rebel movements. You may laugh, but we do not laugh. We find this very serious.

What can you expect from our university people or our young generation with the type of leadership that you are giving them, sometimes?

Getting down to business, he attacked the brief more specifically. We had pointed out that poor people find it difficult to travel in the Maritimes; Senator Fournier made it clear what he thinks of people who can't afford to travel to Halifax from Fredericton.

You have made a great contribution to transportation because you have brought all the problems of transportation in. You end by saying that the only way you can go from Halifax to Fredericton is by hitch-hiking and by begging. I will tell you gentlemen that there are thousands of people that are trying to go between Fredericton and Halifax not by hitch-hiking and not by begging. Maybe it is the only type of transportation that you people can afford. I feel sorry for you.

Charging ahead, he called on his vast resources of economic wisdom to defend the heavy water plant on the grounds that if the money hadn't been wasted in Nova Scotia, it would have been wasted somewhere else:

You have mentioned some dissatisfaction about the heavy-water plant in Nova Scotia as if you were experts in the matter. Let me tell you also that you have a lot to learn. There are two sides to the coin on this story. Maybe your side is right up to a point

EXCERPTS FROM THE BRIEF

For example, consider the man who wants to travel from Fredericton to Halifax. If he goes by Canadian National, he must take a bus leaving at 10:10 a.m. for Newcastle, over a hundred miles away. Arriving in Newcastle at 2:30, he catches the train, which arrives in Halifax at 9:30. For a trip of less than 300 miles, he has spent nearly 12 hours. The cost is \$10.50 to \$12.20 depending on the day of the week on which he travels. To transact a day's business -- looking, let us say, for employment -- he must spend two nights in a hotel and two days on the road. A round trip is going to cost the best part of \$60 -- for one way

On the topic of housing, for instance, we would cheerfully argue that private ownership of land and uncontrolled speculation in it are probably no longer defensible. In the City of Fredericton, for example, a developed lot costs something in the neighborhood of \$8,000 to \$10,000; with a \$15,000 house the payments on a 90 percent mortgage at prevailing rates of interest would be over \$200 per month -- a price few working men can pay. It is time we recognized that urban land, at least, is a public resource. Public ownership of urban land would also have implications for the provision of parks and other recreational facilities, which in turn would have an obviously beneficial effect on the quality of life of the urban poor.

We wish to ask, however, whether the disadvantaged do wish, or should wish, to be integrated into a society whose chief flowers seem to be the tacky-tacky boxes and chrome-plated monsters which cover the continent from Halifax to Los Angeles; whose goals can apparently only be formulated in economic terms; whose idea of entertainment is "I Love Lucy", and whose idea of art is a K-Mart reproduction of Norman Rockwell. How many of us are really happy with a society whose gross national product is one-third garbage, a society which views as human necessities such products as electric shoe polishers, floral-patterned toilet paper and vaginal deodorants, a society whose economic system apparently depends for its health on war and waste? What have the poor ever done to us that we should wish to inflict such things on them?

In our view, it is a gross irony that governments continue to try to convert the Maritimes into another extension of the North American neon jungle at just the point in time at which that jungle is under attack from a wide variety of its citizens who have come to recognize that it serves only the needs of power-hungry politicians and corporate bondholders. The affluent society, it seems clear, does not speak to human needs; and the young it produces are often inclined to enter a kind of voluntary poverty as hippies and drop-outs. Refugees from central Canada and the United States are moving into the Maritimes in considerable numbers not because they believe it will become another New Jersey or Ontario, but because they hope it won't; they hope it will remain a decentralized region in which individual people relate to one another as individuals.

but in the meantime all this money has been spent in the Maritimes and it would not have been spent in the Maritimes; it would have been spent somewhere else in Canada. It has produced employment for thousands of people and it will give Canada, when it is completed, even with all the problems there have been to build it, one of the best heavy-water plants in the world.

Moved, perhaps by the word "ridicule", and glancing down at a copy of *The Mysterious East* -- a publication he had clearly never seen before -- he noticed the caricature of Premier Robichaud which graced our July issues' cover, and let us know what he thinks about ridicule of public officials -- as practiced, presumably, by every editorial cartoonist in North America. He also made it clear that he holds no brief for the democratic right to dissent, that he couldn't be more loyal to the Premier of the Province if he were a dictator:

I may not agree with Premier Robichaud in many things but today he is my premier and I respect him as the Honourable Louis Robichaud, premier of my province, as a Canadian citizen. Many dictators have the respect I give my premier.

It is the same thing with the Prime Minister of Canada; he is the Prime Minister of Canada and I have no right to ridicule him. Nothing is going to destroy our society faster than people like you ridiculing the leaders of our country.

Finally, Senator Fournier said,

I will cherish this brief because it is the cheapest and meaningless brief that we have seen since we started across the country. We have received hundreds of briefs. Some of them were rather really rough but there was always two sides to the coin. There is always the constructive side.

It is nice to criticize. It is the easiest thing in the world, but when you do criticize you want to learn at your young age, you must offer some constructive criticism, if you want to do what you think you are doing.

I said I will cherish this brief. I will frame it and keep it as a souvenir. As I said, in my opinion, it is the most meaningless brief that this committee has received. It is just a series of platitudes, a perfect image of the sponsoring group. There is nothing constructive in this brief. All the world is wrong. The only useful thing is the Mysterious East, which is ready to disappear like the rest of literature of this nature. You will not survive very long. You have made a great contribution, as I said a while ago, by putting back into the record of the statements I made.

This morning -- you are an educated man -- you were asked not to read the brief in its full length but just to comment on it. Of all the hundreds of briefs we have received in Canada by people from all levels of society, educated and uneducated, you as university professors, felt you were not able to comment on your brief but you wanted to read it word for word, which showed a weakness -- that you are not sure of yourselves because you have to depend upon something you have written behind dark walls.

Now, Mr. Chairman, having made my comments, I

MORE EXCERPTS

We are not convinced, however, that we have any business at all appearing before this committee. You ought to be hearing from people in poverty, not from middle-class academics, however concerned the academics may be. But no unemployed man who has been systematically made to feel worthless and incompetent -- which is what the spiritual aspect of poverty consists in -- is going to come here before so august a body as a Senate Committee and tell you what he thinks why no one will hire him, how his family is suffering and how inadequate he feels.

Finally, since it is our impression that the chief criticism of this committee has been, from the start, that it was not getting out and meeting the people about whom it was ostensibly concerned, we have one final recommendation. It is that each member of the committee put on a set of old clothes, take a five dollar bill, and disappear for a week into a city with which he is not particularly familiar and if possible a city in which the majority language is not his own; or, alternatively, that he travel six or eight hundred miles on his five dollars. Then come back and listen to the Boards of Trade, the Home and School Associations, the well-intentioned middle-class academics. After living poor for a week you may know -- as they don't -- which parts of their presentations should be taken with a grain of salt.



Senator Quart

am here to listen. I have nothing against these boys. They are trying to do good. I feel sometimes they are doing the wrong thing. I feel sorry that people with that ability, that capacity, that education, would not be working on the right track and changing their attitude so as to be constructive for the young generation.

They are in the field; they have the opportunity. They are within the walls of the universities and they should try to do something constructive with the young generation, instead of something destructive.

That is all I will say now, Mr. Chairman, and I thank you.

Much of the next hour or so was spent discussing the implications of our "attack" on Senator Fournier, along with some matters that had actually been brought up in our brief. But it was the speech of Senator Josie Quart from Quebec that was the highlight of the afternoon. She began with a defense of Fournier that was a masterpiece of ironic character assassination, and went on to line up with

him on the side of purity and virtue in education. The speech demands quotation:

Senator Quart: *Mr. Chairman and gentlemen of the Mysterious East, I find it rather funny to think of the word "mysterious" when it comes to the Maritimes. However, it is with a feeling of sadness that I venture a few remarks in this debate; not in any way to defend Senator Fournier, because he does not need me or anybody else to defend him, nor his remarks. For those of us who know him, we know he is well known for his justice and fair play and very frank attitude about things. He does not hedge in dealing with people, and especially with underprivileged and unemployed.*

Now for your information, gentlemen, maybe you would not have made the sacrifice he made this week, and I am sure I am going to shock him because he is bashful. There was a family reunion for his family which I believe was organized quite a while ago.

Senator Fournier: *Once a year.*

Senator Quart: *Once a year they have this reunion, and he gave it up in order to be here with us for these meetings for the poor, for the young, for the old, and for the middle-aged, and what-have-you.*

He gave up all these days and is going home for just two days to be with his family. Now that is pretty noble.

I want to go just one step further. This is my reaction. I have grandsons maybe just your age. I feel sorry that you have this attitude, and I sat through the Committee on Mass Media where they had these underground radical newspapers, left, right, pink, blue, what-have-you, come before us, but I do not think have ever had quite the feeling. It was not brought home to me nearly so much as in listening to some of your remarks.

I have always believed in freedom of the press. I hope I do not become disillusioned in my old age. Sometimes freedom of the press can be abused of freedom and when you tear down respect for all authority and ridicule the leaders of our political parties, no matter who they are, I think in spite of all your PhD's or whatever it is, what you are doing to our young people is dreadful. What are they going to become? They will not have respect for anybody, and please think it over each time you take up your pen, or whenever you take up your sword, and cut down and ridicule everybody. Somebody must be right.

It turned out later that in fact the committee had at the last minute and to the intense discomfiture of the people who had arranged it, cancelled its visit to New Brunswick's North Shore -- and rumour had it that part of the reason was Senator Fournier's family reunion.

It would be possible to go on at length to analyze the composition of the committee, the people they actually heard from in their travels, the degree of flexibility their discussions betray. But all of that is easily done by reading the transcripts of their hearings which are widely available; the remarks of Senators Fournier and Quart indicate pretty clearly what you can expect when the committee weighs in with its final report.