

Canada and my father: defying the politics of greed & selfishness

One of the most vivid memories of my life is of driving out of far northern New York into Canada and 10 days later coming back into Maine from Canada's Maritime Provinces.

It was the contrast in housing that blew me and my wife away. On the American side, rural housing was heavy with manufactured homes -- mostly single-wide and showing their age. I am sure they were as common a source of home fires there as in Eastern Oregon.

Most of the rest of rural housing was bedraggled wood, in need of paint, often with siding in disarray. Many were farmhouses long since given up for less unforgiving soil. The small, declining towns looked better -- but not a lot better.

The contrast with the Canadian side was stunning. There, "quaint" didn't mean dilapidated. Town after town, even in the economically depressed Maritime Provinces, the poorest in Canada, looked neat. Every house -- and my wife and I paid attention -- was in one piece and painted up. Not Eastern Oregon either.

I weep at the unrelenting propaganda of greed and selfishness. Both are intellectualized and rationalized by think tanks promoting doctrines of unlimited wealth the rich supposedly deserve and declining incomes for which the poor and middle class can only blame themselves.

Politicians like Wisconsin's anti-union, anti-government governor, Scott Walker, now personify these doctrines.

The anti-union, anti-government mantra has been consistent for over 40 years: Regulation kills jobs. Taxes kill initiative. Unions distort free markets and raise costs. Government helping the poor and working class is bleeding-heart liberalism.

The strategy has been equally consistent: To destroy unions, push for free trade and threaten workers with losing their jobs to China. Private sector unionization, which built the American middle class in the 1930s, has plummeted from a modest 35 percent in the 1940s and 50s to just 6.9 percent today. Middle class income stagnation has been the consequence.

To destroy government, the strategy has been to fight taxes and run up debt. When you look at a graph of accumulated U.S. federal debt as a percentage of the gross national product, under Eisenhower, Kennedy-Johnson and Nixon-Ford, the debt came down steadily from over 100% after World War II to something of its historical average of 20 percent in the 1970s.

Ronald Reagan doubled it to over 40 percent in the 80s and George W. Bush took it even higher in the 2000s. (Bill Clinton balanced budgets and lowered the debt.)

Now the strategy is to set de-unionized, once-middle class private sector Americans against the unionized 35 percent of public sector employees who still have decent wages and benefits.

No matter that Wisconsin's deficit is relatively small, its public pensions are fully funded and private sector compensation as a whole is still slightly higher than public sector compensation. No matter that many private sector companies have failed to fund their pensions and the federal government has bailed the companies out with the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation.

My father was a small businessman, a Republican with an Old New England belief in Christian paternalism. With a factory of a little over 100 employees, he refused to raise his salary to more than a few times those of his employees.

He too hated unions but fighting them was never about grinding down his workers. It was about thinking unions unnecessary because caring about his workers was so much a part of who he was. The one thing he might have hated more than unions was abusive employers who made workers want unions.

Now the anti-union, anti-government agenda is represented by the likes of multibillionaire Rupert Murdoch's Fox News and the Koch brothers, two oil multibillionaires who, having inherited their father's business, fund think tanks and politicians like Walker.

Ultimately, my father – long before the business was lost to Chinese competition -- reached across the wellspring of Christian conscience to realize that most employers were not like him and endorse an expanded role for government in helping ordinary people.

It is no coincidence that Canada has grown right through our recession and required no mass bailout of irresponsible financial giants.

My father would have understood Canada.