

How the new activists are making everyone uncomfortable (Part Two of a series of two)
By Ben Bennett

A recent column looked at how activism is looked down upon by a growing number of people in this community. This column looks at why.

As I write this, lots of people are gathering in Toronto to protest the G20 summit.

There was a similar meeting of heads of government in Quebec City, 10 years ago.

Most of those who went to protest wanted to send a message that the main beneficiaries from all the globalization that was going on were big companies, and the poor, democracy and the environment were paying the price. And there was a sense that the public pressure may have some effect.

What made these protests different, was the fact that an awful lot of the people there were nice, middle class, middle-aged folks who don't usually find themselves at odds with the authorities. Folks like me.

While there was understandably a lot of media attention paid to the "hard" activists who spent their time trying to tear down the barricades the police had erected, there was no denying the presence of thousands of folks who weren't doing that.

For many, the huge steel barriers were fair game, representing, as they did, an affront to the general public by a detached elite of decision makers. The powers-that-be were a little scared by the previous protests in Seattle, and were suitably fearful of the mob.

It was almost comical how they tried to hide from the common people. I don't recall a lot of fuss being made about the cost, but I do remember thinking there was something weird about a democracy where the leaders are so afraid of their constituents that they had to essentially jail themselves behind fences.

I really don't think anyone seriously believed there was terrorist threat, as such. This was all about keeping the plebs and the troublemakers at bay. It wasn't until September of that year that the most successful terrorist attack in modern history devastated thousands of lives, shook a nation's confidence and changed the picture forever.

While there has always been a small number of disaffected souls at big events whose only purpose seems to be cause trouble, that group is now large and well-organized enough to persuade the police in Toronto that some serious compromising of our civil rights was needed to control them.

You'd never know it from the media coverage, but there was a parallel summit put on by civil society groups in Toronto, as there had been in Quebec. – and a lot of peaceful protest.

But let's get back to Guelph.

Locally, we have a small cadre of hard activists who have been busy making everyone's life uncomfortable. Refusing to accept the public process, they step outside the law, or straddle it, in some cases, much to the dismay of many who sympathize with the broader issues they raise.

After four years of decidedly non-progressive local government ended in 2006, it is a supreme irony that this latest round of young activists have been making their presence felt during a time when the chances for progressive government have been at their best, with several former activists now part of the system.

The fact that the current council is hampered by the reality of previous decisions, has little actual power and very constrained finances may buy them some political patience

with the middle class and middle-aged set, but they are getting no such quarter from the hard activists.

Having worked within the system over the years, putting in thousands of hours of time on various causes, including raising funds to hire lawyers when necessary, and working to elect sympathetic councilors, many of our traditional activists are upset by the actions of these hard activists.

While there are many aspects of the current system that frustrate us all, most are quite heavily invested in it. And having others showing no respect for that system and offering no real alternative rubs a lot of us the wrong way.

But unless we all want to live in a world with no rules, I am not sure how the two camps can ever be reconciled.

(Ben Bennett is a member of the Guelph Mercury Community Editorial Board. His past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)

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