

Priced Out of Democracy

By Christine McHale
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An on-line poll in the Hamilton Spectator news website asks the following question:

Should Greenpeace have to pay for the costs associated with its protest?

Yes	(82.52 %)
No	(17.48 %)

This poll, obviously, is being run in light of the recent arrests of some Greenpeace protesters while trying to disrupt the delivery of coal to the Nanticoke coal fired generating plant in Ontario.

To be sure, Greenpeace is noted for pushing the limit in protests, but, to the best of my knowledge, they do not practice violence.

Should the Greenpeace protesters have been arrested? In my opinion, yes. They went onto a ship without permission, so, at the very least, this would be trespassing. There are other charges such as public mischief. Should Greenpeace have to pay the policing costs associated with its protest? Absolutely, resoundingly NO!

This is a very, very dangerous precedent to try to set and one, which, no doubt, the majority of the people who participated in the Hamilton Specs on-line poll, didn't really think about.

In the reactionary exercise of taking the poll one would think that it would be a good idea to have protesters pay for the costs associated with policing to keep protests peaceful. After all, why should the tax payer have to foot the cost for something he or she may not agree with in the first place. But you have to think where this could potentially lead to.

Earlier this year, Caledonia Wake Up Call was planning for another peaceful protest in Caledonia, and one of the residents decided to go through all the town hall red tape just to keep the politicians and police happy.

After being given numerous forms to fill out and submit, and after realizing that no matter how much we tried to conform to the powers that be, it became clear we would get nowhere. The cost alone would prevent us, as well as almost all other peaceful protest groups from staging any protests.

We were told we would have to pay the cost of policing and that cost was \$50.00 an hour for each police officer for a minimum of 4 hours. Of course the police would decide how many police officers to deploy. So, say they decided to deploy 200 police officers (that's about how many they had out at previous peaceful protests). That's 800 man/hours at \$50.00 per hour to the tune of \$40,000.00 dollars.

So there went the idea of a peaceful protest and our voice with it, right out the window.

In a democracy, everyone has a right to peaceful protest. Everyone. Period. No one has the right to commit violence, but all Canadian citizen's are guaranteed the right to be heard in

peaceful protests by our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This is constitutional and cannot be taken away from you.

Also, it is not up to individual Canadians or protest groups to arrange for policing. Since the right to peaceful protest is guaranteed under our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, it is up to the government to provide for policing, and to bear the cost thereof.

The flip side of this coin is that people, politicians in this case, in positions of power will do whatever it takes to protect their positions of power.

In a dictatorship this usually means arresting anyone who would dare speak out against them. In a democracy they can't do this, so they must try to come up with ways that would seem to fit into democracy. They must be seen to be doing what would appear to the average person, to be the right thing to do.

Take the recent protest in Montebello in Quebec where the Quebec Provincial Police planted their own people among the protesters and, according to video on You Tube, attempted to incite some violence, thereby giving the police the 'excuse' they needed to put an end to what was, up to that point, a peaceful protest.

On the surface all appears well. The protesters protested, peacefully. The government, seemingly wanting the protesters to go away, use the police to stop a protest once violence starts. Of course you and I don't know this part.

Problem is, apart from the police, none of the legitimate protesters was breaking any law. If it wasn't for the video on You Tube and the ensuing embarrassment of the police caught in their own scheme and lies to cover this up, you and I would be none the wiser. We would have seen a protest turn violent, then seen police do what they were supposed to do anyways. Long live democracy, eh!

So although the thought of having Greenpeace pay for the police costs associated with their protest seems like the right thing, again why should the tax payer pay, the possibilities are scary to say the least.

If this were to happen, the precedent would be set and any group wanting to denounce something they do not agree with, or support something they do agree with by having a protest rally, would evaporate faster than a drop of water on a red hot frying pan.

On the surface, the 'right thing' would appear to have been done by governments and police, but the result, you and I would no longer afford to be able to publicly speak out in a protest rally.

Remember, those in positions of power will do whatever they can to protect their positions of power.

By the way, this statement of protecting positions of power came from a documentary done by the CBC about Catholic priests who abused children and those who were in positions of power in the church who covered up to protect themselves and their positions [of power] within the church.

This happens over and over and it's basic human nature.

So next time you participate in a poll, take a while to really think about your answer to that question. Where can it potentially lead to and are you prepared to face the consequences?