

Poverty without borders

GRAHAM
LETTNER

“It should be abundantly clear by now that we simply don’t know how to give. Name me the people in a better position right now than us to use their resources to combat the real, severe challenges of the world. Don’t worry if you can’t: these people don’t exist.”

Last Thursday, before the sun even had a chance to burn up the morning frost, a stranger pressed a newspaper extra into my hand outside of the HUB LRT station. It read, “Worldwide celebrations: End of extreme poverty declared.” The headline being in obvious error, I leafed through the paper to find that this was a futuristic news announcement for the year 2025.

This optimistic newspaper was one of 4000 that the local chapter of Engineers Without Borders (EWB) passed out that Thursday at LRT stations across the city—and the message is a great one. Told retrospectively, the end of poverty worldwide proves not only to be achievable, but also obviously worthy of the efforts needed to make it so. Different articles in the newspaper go on to outline how the efforts of individuals, corporations and government, which committed the target of 0.7 per cent of their GDP to poverty reduction, all played important roles in ending extreme poverty.

After reading this admittedly fictitious story, I couldn’t help but ask myself: why, when we know what it takes to end poverty, do we decide to do nothing? Just having to pose the question is incredibly frustrating.

Apart from eradicating extreme

poverty, today there’s another futuristic goal requiring a GDP commitment of the world’s richest nations: climate change. To seriously address the root causes of climate change, we must invest one per cent of global GDP. So says Sir Nicholas Stern, former Chief Economist of the World Bank, who’s been commissioned by the British government to investigate the threat posed by global warming. Sir Nicholas has concluded that, if we do nothing, we face permanently losing 20 per cent of global GDP.

But now, for the cruel twist: the only G8 country posting annual surpluses of billions of dollars is Canada—and the only province posting annual surpluses of the same magnitude is Alberta. Amazingly, our federal Conservative government argues the impossibility of meeting Kyoto targets, and our provincial Progressive Conservative government argues the impossibility of decreasing carbon dioxide emissions. The grounds for such arguments? Our beloved economies simply won’t survive the hardship.

These arguments don’t hold water because they’re simply cases of wanting to have it both ways. When our economy is weak, we don’t have the money to give, but when our economy is strong, we still don’t have

the money to give—though it’s for a whole host of other reasons.

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We’re pretty astute at letting ourselves off the hook of responsibility that comes with our opulence. A throwaway line or two about how we simply aren’t so vulgar as to interfere with the free market is usually all it takes. Things are so endlessly and fundamentally about ourselves, that even when we have the chance to help others we don’t know how.

The EWB campaign was powerful because it spoke to how even such an ambitious goal as the end of poverty is possible, and how important the decisions made today can be. Beloved rocker/activist Bono captures both the promise and the arrogance of our position: “We are the first generation that can look extreme and stupid poverty in the eye, look across the water to Africa and elsewhere, and say this and mean it: we have the cash, we have the drugs, we have the science—but do we have the will?” Here in Canada, at least for now, the answer is no.

Women still have a long way to go

Women get their very own day today—but it only reinforces the status quo

KAT
HUTTER

seem to erase our femininity altogether. I can’t help but notice how the arrival of Twiggy’s tiny, pre-pubescent physique on the fashion scene in the 1960s—and subsequent revolution of our notion of female beauty—happened in close proximity to the popular fight for women’s equality in society.

As the models and mannequins get skinnier and skinnier, a lean, boyish frame replaces that which was once the voluptuous female ideal. Of course, at the core of second-wave feminism there was outcry against the creation of this new role model. However, the image of the tough, lean woman CEO wearing a tailored variation of a men’s business suit is what has endured as the picture of a successful woman.

Naturally thin women, do not be offended: it’s not really body mass index that I seek to evoke, but the symbolic meaning behind the images that we choose to value.

I’m troubled that discourse about women’s liberation is so often oriented in the popular consciousness—not to mention in many academic studies in the area—on whether or not women are able effectively to enter territory that was once occupied solely or mostly by men. The better we imitate the dominant, powerful and stereotypically masculine, the stronger we are deemed to be.

In a speech made to women’s rights activists recently, NDP Status of Women critic Irene Mathysen claimed that women are still more likely to be doing the majority of work in society caring for children

and other dependants. In her words, “Women deserve better.” In all fairness, I don’t think it was her wish to demean the task of caring for the young and the infirm; but she unintentionally stumbled upon the troubling logic that underlies our conventional understanding of social justice, nevertheless.

We celebrate women’s achievements in a man’s world as the epitome of liberation—but what exactly is it that we’re liberating ourselves from? It seems that we’ve internalized the same traditional values that once spoke to women’s inferiority, and gauge our success by how far we were able to distance ourselves from that which may be considered feminine and thus unworthy.

What women have been striving for is entrance into positions of power in society, yet the positions of power remain relatively unchanged. Whatever your particular set of sex organs, there’s still ample opportunity to be under-appreciated and under-represented at the decision-making levels of our society.

Whoever works in the stereotypical “male” job is going to make a lot more money than someone who works in daycare, geriatric care, social work or primary education. Whether it’s a woman or a man staying at home to raise their children, they won’t be paid for their 24-hour on-call labour, nor will they be able to record it on a resumé. And even now, on International Women’s Day in 2007, that which was traditionally stereotyped as “feminine” is still at the bottom of the value hierarchy.

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