

Op-Ed Page

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Excuse me for being slow, but I just don't get tax cuts. It says in the paper that if this government is re-elected, taxes are going to be cut some more, and services are going to be improved some more too, and jobs will be created and everyone will be happy. And I think, in my slow way, "How can they possibly cut taxes and improve services? Don't taxes pay for services? For things we need, as a society?" I know, you're laughing, what a moron, right?

I guess my simple-mindedness is genetic, because my father had simple theories too. I've never forgotten a little talk we had once at tax time. He said, "I dislike giving my money to the government as much as anyone. But there's something I dislike even more - it's stepping over the bodies of people sleeping on the street. I don't want to see human suffering, so I don't mind paying taxes."

My father died more than ten years ago. In his prime tax-paying years, there were very few bodies sleeping in doorways, not like now. So he wasn't even talking about the opulent Canadian society in which he lived. I think he was remembering the Depression; as a boy, in New York City, he learned the life-and-death importance of Roosevelt's New Deal and other government programs. Though he eventually became a university vice-president in a hefty tax bracket, I never, ever, heard him complain.

But times have changed. Last year, I went to visit my father's cousin, who married a wealthy man and lives in a million-dollar house in Connecticut. As I floated that afternoon in the paradise of their pool, surrounded by acres of lawn and trees, I became aware of what my relative's husband was saying to his son, as they sat drinking Chablis by the pool. He was griping, bitterly, about the "crippling" level of his taxes. And I thought, "There was a time when a man like this would have been thought selfish and greedy. But now, fighting not to share your money has become a badge of honour."

How did we move, as a society, from the unquestioned rightness of helping others, to the unquestioned rightness of "what's mine is mine, go get your own?" I wonder if one reason is because there are no Franklin Delano Roosevelts around now, with a largeness of vision. Our leaders have no memory of a dark and hungry time like the Depression. They seem not to realize that sheer luck - the luck of sterling background and inheritance - has played a big part in their own success. So we get pundits like David Frum, raised in the shelter of such kindness and privilege that he regards people who have less - and especially people who have a lot less - with an incomprehension verging on hatred. We get Mike Harris, who, with his harsh answers to complex questions, seems to want to punish everyone who is not exactly like him. Frum now lives in the U.S.; Harris is bringing the U.S. to us.

But the great country to the south, which provided such humanitarian vision during the Depression, is now hurtling in the opposite direction. And, it appears, is paying a terrible price for its lack of compassion and generosity, with a society of lost children, violence,

and paranoia. My father's cousin lives in fear, as if the "have-nots," ever poorer, ever greater in number, will one day march up the long driveway to her marble doorstep, towing a guillotine.

Like my dad, I see the politics of finance in a relatively uncomplicated way. There is money, and there is need, so what should happen is obvious; in the end, rich and poor, we all benefit. I remember a Raffi song my kids used to sing when they were very small.

"It's mine but you can have some;
with you I'd like to share it,
'cause if I share it with you
you'll have some too."

As far as I'm concerned, the response to tax cuts is as simple as that.