

# Self-Delusion, Disaster, and Governance

As the United States marks the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Canadians might do well to reflect on how our own public institutions are coping with some of the critical issues of the day. Vancouver social policy researcher **Steve Kerstetter**, a former director of the National Council of Welfare and long-time government-watcher, offers this personal view on government and governance.

THE DEVASTATION ON THE U.S. Gulf Coast caused by Hurricane Katrina last summer was all the more shocking because of the failure of the federal, state, and local governments to deal swiftly and effectively with the crisis at hand.

It was a shock felt round the world, but a special shock to people like myself who believe that governments are the best institutions to solve many of the larger problems we face as a society.

Canada has been fortunate to avoid massive government failures in dealing with natural disasters. On reflection, though, it hasn't done very well in many other areas of public policy. The results may not show up on the front page day after day, but they are devastating all the same to the people affected.

Here are just a few of the many government failures in the news in recent months:

- The investigation of the 1985 Air India bombing, Canada's worst terrorist attack, dragged on for years and eventually ended in the acquittal of two of the prime suspects in 2005. One of the truly bizarre revelations that came out during the trial was that the CSIS had erased tapes of wiretaps that might have

assisted the prosecution.

- Members of the House of Commons voted unanimously in 1989 to work to end child poverty by the year 2000, yet the child poverty rate is even higher now than it was in 1989. BC's own child poverty rate has grown to the highest in Canada, but BC's minister of employment and income assistance apparently doesn't think it's a problem. The premier and the minister of finance continue to talk about children, but they have done precious little to address child poverty.

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- It took many years of complaints, adjudication, and posturing for Canada to progress with the softwood lumber dispute. The best the federal government was able to negotiate was a short-term deal that lets the Americans keep \$1 billion of the \$5 billion in duties wrongfully imposed by the U.S.
- Law enforcement officials took years to follow up all the clues surrounding the disappearance and death of more than 50 workers in the sex trade from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Most observers understand the unspoken truth underlying the tragedy: if it

had been 50 female students from UBC, police would have been no stone left unturned. Authorities in northern B.C. face similar criticisms with respect to the young hitchhikers who disappeared along the “Highway of Tears.”

- Governments have yet to solve the most serious problems facing medicare. They have still not delivered on promises to trim the waiting lists for surgery—this many months after they declared that solving the problem was central to fixing our health care system. The Conservatives didn’t even include money to address the problem in their first budget.

All this is not to mention the sponsorship scandal in Québec, tax policies that have widened the gap between rich and poor, the feared collapse of the B.C. sockeye fishery, continuing roadblocks in allowing foreign-trained professionals to become certified to work in Canada and—oh yes—complaints from the federal auditor general about the state of emergency preparedness in Canada.

And the list goes on.

The only characteristic that all these examples have in common is poor outcomes. The governments at fault collectively span most of the Canadian political spectrum, and it is difficult to believe that the outcomes would have been markedly better with governments of different political stripes.

The cases also reflect a variety of root causes. Incompetence is certainly a contributing factor

in many of the examples, but some are mainly the result of a lack of political will, misplaced government priorities or inadequate govern-

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ment resources.

People on the Right might argue that these failures are further proof that governments simply aren’t up to the job of governing. There may be some truth in that analysis, but it’s impossible to imagine the alternative: the private sector coping with crime and punishment, negotiating land claim treaties or ending child poverty.

People on the Left might insist that the failures aren’t as bad as they seem. That’s hardly a credible stand any longer in light of the number of failures and the fact that they pervade government departments and agencies almost everywhere. If people expect governments to address the needs of Canadians, they have to insist on much higher standards of performance.

Holding governments accountable is easier said than done, of course, as witnessed by the many university courses on public administration and the many scholarly and other volumes in the bookstores about fixing the machinery of government.

What’s also needed is a change in the political culture. Personally, I’d start with a frontal attack on self-delusion in government.

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There are three forms of self-delusion that go a long way to explaining many of the current perversities of public policy.

The first is the failure of governments to admit that anything is wrong. Any good twelve-step program begins with a frank and honest admission by participants that they have a problem. Perhaps it's time for a twelve-step program for government. Every public opinion poll I've seen about attitudes toward occupations in Canada shows politicians near or at the bottom of the list. People in public life don't do themselves or the rest of us any favours by pretending that all's well.

The second form of self-delusion is spin, or what we all used to call propaganda. Every government tries to cast itself in the best possible light, but the spin doctors have clearly spun themselves out of control. During the cuts in provincial government programs during the first term of the current BC Liberal government, for example, every cut was presented as a beacon of hope for the future. I could almost imagine the ultimate BC government news release announcing the end of the world tomorrow under the following headline: "No taxes for British Columbians next year."

The third issue is cheer leading, which has become endemic in federal government circles in recent years. Ottawa has had more than its share of half-baked ideas, but there's rarely a word of criticism from within the ranks of gov-

ernment. Too many politicians in the governing party and too many senior bureaucrats prefer to be team players and cheer for bad policy rather than fight for good policy.

These self-delusion reached epidemic proportions in Ottawa under the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin. Will it be any different with Stephen Harper and the Conservatives? The early signs are not very encouraging.

Similar questions could be asked about provincial and local governments. Will the BC Liberals be more open in their second mandate or will they consult mainly with themselves and their supporters? Will local councils and public agencies such as Translink really listen to the public or will they continue to follow their own agendas?

It may to be cold comfort, but Canada has never reached the depths of self-delusion that existed in the United States in the early days following Katrina. We all recall President Bush's remark to his emergency measures chief Michael Brown during a well-publicized visit to New Orleans: "You're doing a heck of a job, Brownie." The remark was meant as a compliment, but turned out to be a misguided testimonial to cronyism and incompetence. Brown resigned in disgrace a short while later.

The question for Canadians is whether we can do better than our neighbours to the south, not only in disaster relief, but in all areas of public policy. ■

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