



Same head, same gun

It is two years ago now since old union man Bob Strachan began openly questioning the right of workers in essential industries to strike. Of course, the transport minister wasn't really himself at the time. He had just surrendered abjectly in the face of an illegal strike by his ferry workers. He thought "the people of this province should realize that we had a gun to our head."

Mr. Strachan's head attracts guns. There's another one there now. Held by workers at his Insurance Corporation of B.C. this time. And one must ask whether the minister still is "reassessing" — the term he used in the days of the ferry troubles — whether workers in essential industries should be allowed to strike. Or has he come to a conclusion?

The ICBC strike is a legal strike, all right — the government's permissiveness has made it so. But no less than the ferry walkout it involves workers in a Crown corporation, vital to the million or so car-owners in this province, if not to the

secure and orderly conduct of the province itself.

Asking whether ICBC is an essential service is a rhetorical question. The New Democratic government answered that when it deemed automobile insurance essential enough to take over as a state enterprise. Auto insurance is compulsory and Autoplan is the only show in town. To play the present strike by ear, as the government is attempting to do apparently while waiting for divine intervention, is both highly dangerous and contemptuous of the public it deprived of the freedom of choice.

The government has the usual options. It can starve out the strikers, if the chaos resulting from motorists driving in an insurance limbo permits it. It can cave in to what its computers tell it are outrageously unacceptable demands. It can eat its shibboleth that every worker has the right to hold a whole society at ransom and resort, once more, to a legislated return to work and some form of compulsory binding arbitration. What a choice. And what a mess.

The NDP government's adventure in state insurance hardly needs news like this — it is something less than an actuarial showpiece even when the folks are looking after the shop. But the issue involved is larger than ICBC or even of the spectacle of a province-full of motorists vaguely-protected or unprotected as they go about their essential business. Like the government of Pierre Trudeau, a similar victim of its own labor law liberality as the dreary rerun of the postal workers' shenanigans reminds us, the government of Dave Barrett must face facts.

There are indeed essential services where suzerainty of traditional bargaining procedures leading to strike is suicidal. Prime Minister Trudeau knows this. He too, in his inimitable way, has been musing about reassessment. That neither he nor Transport Minister Strachan seems able to reassess his way to some sort of light at the end of the tunnel is tough luck on the rest of us.

Permanent built-in legislative machinery to head off essential service disruptions — car insurance, ferries, post offices and so on — is demanded of both jurisdictions. Reassessment has been going on long enough.

Burn, baby

Those firemen probably did the smart thing by going ahead with that car arson demonstration even though the Autoplan adjusts it was staged for didn't show up because of the strike at the Insurance Corporation of B.C.

Despite picket lines, real life goes on, confusing as it is likely to be for firemen, motorists, and most of all, one may imagine, Transport Minister Bob Strachan.

The problems of Autoplan—multi-million-dollar deficit, bodymen's revolution, now the office workers' strike — are such, indeed, that it would have been symbolic of Mr. Strachan to have attended the big burn with a fiddle. Well, bagpipes would have done.

But the heaps did not go up in vain. The firemen, at any rate, know better now how to establish the cause of car arson and how to determine who is responsible. Mr. Strachan, presiding over a far greater disaster, just might pick up some tips.

Robert E. Wood

Time to start grasping at harebrained cures

WASHINGTON — Here is an urgent message for the nation's economic policymakers: the time has come to start grasping at harebrained ideas.

President Ford and a growing number of experts, both in and out of politics, all tell us persuasively that the economy is entering, or may be about to enter, a recovery. But what does that really mean?

Even two years from now, the prevailing projections indicate that eight per cent of the labor force could still be out of work, and inflation would probably remain well above five per cent — too much for distressed households, and too much to sustain the investment and savings needed to assure a stable supply of new jobs.

Something fundamental has gone wrong with the way we handle our economy.

Instead of being able to avoid excessive inflation by accepting excessive unemployment, or vice versa, we now are stuck with too much of both. And the unhappy economic predictions confirm that even the best taxing-and-spending programs and the finest monetary and credit policies won't solve the muddle in which we find ourselves. Ordinary answers just won't do.

True, the mainstream of political economists offers a few alternative suggestions. Some would have the nation try wage and price controls again; they would fail again. Others, including prominent

legislators like Senator Hubert H. Humphrey (D-Minn.) and Representative Henry S. Reuss (D-Wis.), call for central economic planning or government allocation of credit to achieve national goals; of course, the federal policymakers who got us into our current mess would be responsible for all the planning and allocation. Beyond this, even the best central decision-maker cannot orchestrate a modern economy's millions of moving parts — only the market can.

Many sound economists now warn us that the coming "recovery" could lead to another, deeper depression before inflation is knocked down enough to permit any lasting prosperity. In that event, a 1980s depression could trigger tremendous popular pressure to junk the whole free-enterprise system. Maybe we can avoid that threat if we do some tinkering now.

So it is time for Congress and the president to listen to the fringes and take up less-popular proposals — ideas that sound unworkable, or excessive, or even a little nutty. They just might contain the germ of a solution. They need a hearing.

Here are a few:

- Abolish the corporate income tax.
- Set up a massive, permanent government public-jobs program.
- Save money and humiliation by dismantling the welfare, public-housing and

food-stamp systems and establishing a negative income tax.

- Break up the biggest companies, unions and farm co-operatives to foster more competition.
- Put the dollar back on a fixed gold standard and do away with "floating" exchange rates. That way, government will have to squirm publicly whenever its policies trigger more inflation and require another devaluation.

Each proposal is riddled with problems; taken together, they could turn the economy upside down. But, as the glum economic outlook comes clearer to the eye, it should dawn on us all that new answers are needed.

Take public employment programs, for example. We tend to use them when the economy turns sour, as a way of supporting those who bear recession's worst impact. They masquerade as "training," and they are billed as mere way-stations for the weary until the crisis blows over.

But public jobs could be permanent, too, serving just as well in boom times. If nothing else, they could sop up some of the residual job seekers who always seem to suffer most — and whose plight gums up policy in Washington.

Unemployment figures are grossly misleading and provide a terrible guide for policy, but all the same they set the tone in Washington. Whenever joblessness gets down to five per cent and lingers there stubbornly, the political pressure mounts to push the rate down further.

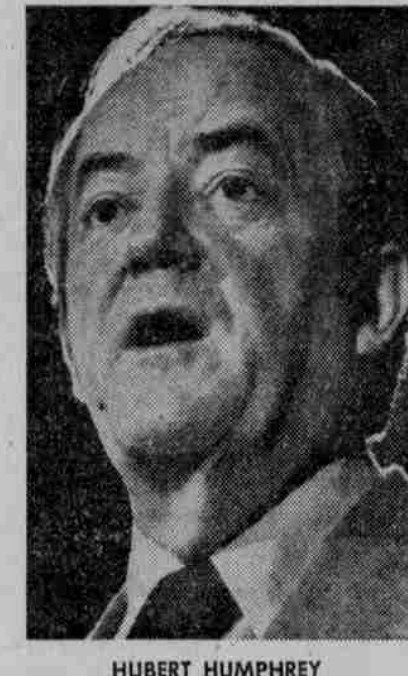
So Congress spends more money on schools, armor and monuments in hope that the nation's added wealth will "trickle down" to the two to three million Americans who are chronically unemployed. It doesn't trickle much, of course, and yet the effort spawns more inflation for everyone.

Public jobs might work a lot better. The staggering amount of money required would go directly to the intended recipients. A University of Maryland professor, Melville J. Ulmer, estimates that three million workers could be hired at a net cost — after subtracting money saved on welfare, unemployment pay and the like — of \$20 billion a year. These workers might build subways, patrol streets, care for the elderly, run child-care centres, plant trees. All these are useful endeavors, and some are badly needed. The program, if designed with the most extreme care, could also reduce political temptations to fight unemployment by fanning inflation. The idea certainly rates thinking about.

So does abolishing the corporate income tax, a deceptive creature and an object of definite if often ill-informed opinions. The idea of taxing all kinds of profits seems righteous, but it encourages waste and obstructs the formation of new capital needed to create jobs.

How can we foster the healthy competition needed to protect both consumers and, in the long term, workers, too? How can the chronically unemployed and the chronically poor be helped and mobilized without starting a catastrophic inflation? How can tax laws be drawn to marshal the profits, investments and savings needed to keep the economy efficient — keep it alive — without windfalls and rip-offs?

New schemes are not readily embraced by government unless they have an obvious popular appeal. Economics obviously lacks that appeal most of the time, and so politicians find it far safer to call once again for cheaper interest rates, or for more or less spending, than to press for totally unfamiliar or seemingly radical solutions. But then our plight is pretty unfamiliar, too.



HUBERT HUMPHREY
wants central planning

Robert A. Jones

Add plants and insects to endangered list

LOS ANGELES — The disappearance of life forms, once limited to higher animals such as birds and mammals, now appears to be spreading rapidly through the vast numbers of plant and insect species.

While the study of endangered species among lower creatures is at a rudimentary stage, one recent survey by a team of Smithsonian Institution botanists listed more than 2,000 native American plants whose existence is now threatened.

Among the plants named in the study were many cacti of the southwestern deserts, wildflowers of the Rocky Mountain region and most of the carnivorous plants still growing in this country, including the Venus Flytrap and the Cobra pitcher plant of Oregon.

"Few people are aware of the urgent need for preventing indiscriminate destruction of the vegetation of this country," the report said, and estimated that 10 per cent of the plant life in the United States is presently threatened or endangered with extinction.

A comparable study of the insect world, proposed several years ago by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, was abandoned when the burgeoning lists of threatened species outstripped the recording capacity of the study team.

Nonetheless, the IUCN study reinforced suspicions long held by some entomologists that many insects requiring specialized environments will soon join the peregrine falcon and the blue whale as creatures facing extinction from their increasing contact with man.

The threat to such smaller creatures, while building for several decades, is only

now beginning to receive serious attention from the scientific community. The lack of concern apparently was based on the popular misconception — shared by many biologists — that insects were virtually invulnerable to extinction because of their adaptable qualities.

"Mosquitos and cockroaches may have adapted very well to man, but others have not," said Dr. Paul Opler, an entomologist. "Many other insects, and these include some of the most attractive and useful, cannot adapt. When man sufficiently disturbs their environment, they disappear."

Dr. Opler, who was recently appointed to direct the new entomological section of the Interior Department's office of endangered species, has proposed a list of 41 butterflies to be included in the government's official register of endangered or threatened species.

Twenty-three of the butterflies on the proposed list are native to California. "In California you have a classic case of a large human population running up against a wide diversity of insects. Something has to give, and so far it's the insects," said Dr. Opler.

Though the deprivation of habitat is by far the largest cause of the disappearance of plants and insects, over-zealous collectors have also been accused of accelerating the process.

Throughout the southwestern deserts, several unusual types of cacti have been plundered by commercial collectors and rendered virtually extinct.

In the Pacific Northwest and southwestern sections of the country, carnivorous

Come in, Dr. Faustus

How practical of those two Quebec separatist winners of the Governor-General's literary awards.

Rejecting the honor, we mean, but accepting the money.

Take that, Jules Leger, symbol of royal oppression.

Obviously this is something that every revolutionary should know — where to draw the distinction between what gifts can and cannot be accepted from the hated man in the jackboot. Too much — the ribbon in the buttonhole, the key to the Buckingham Palace washroom — and the principle of revolution could be compromised.

But impersonal cash? Well, why not? Even the dirtiest of money can be laundered by a stirring declaration of independence on the awards platform, a satisfyingly boorish display of ingratitude. Can't it? Come in, Dr. Faustus.

Revolutionaries — think about it. There must be some reason that Ottawa's grants-givers and awards boards so avidly pursue avowed enemies of the state with open purses. No government can be dumb enough to subsidize its own destruction.

So what motivates this generosity? How come a domestic aid program in the scrubbed-up cellar bomb factories? Why is there no escape from the merciless federal moneybags even for the terrorist once-removed? Merit can't be the only answer. Revolutionaries are good. But not that good.

So there's got to be a motive somewhere. A catch. A bribe. A subtle subversion. How better to turn a revolutionary into a pussy-cat like the rest of us than by getting his hand accustomed to the great Canadian cookie jar? Show us a revolutionary with his work ethics eroded and we'll show you some dancing Mounties.

The thing is, Canadians, who are nothing if not fair, surely would not want to see advantage taken of a bunch of naive and unsuspecting revolutionaries.

A word of warning, then. Even in this day of the broken contract, crossing one's fingers isn't necessarily protection enough when selling one's soul to the devil. Appearance to the contrary, maybe this one could find his tail with both hands if he really tried.

Erma Bombeck

Her dress defies gravity

CENTERVILLE, Ohio — I go to the movies and watch television to be entertained, not to sit there and fall apart.

Sitting through the Towering Inferno the other night, I found myself slouching in my seat, my legs hopelessly entangled and locked with one another, beads of sweat gathering on my forehead. Unable to stand looking at the screen, I buried my head in my husband's sweater.

Finally, I opened one eye and whispered to him, "Is it over? Has Faye Dunaway fallen out of her dress yet?"

There is something about a dress slit to the waist supported only by gravity and good posture that makes me tense. When Rita Moreno ran to the podium for her Tony in her divided to the waist halter, I nearly fainted. And when Adrienne Barbeau slouches on to the Carson show, I instinctively throw my body across the screen when there is no one in the room but the dog.

I guess it all goes back to my mid-Victorian upbringing where we were taught, "What good is a dress if you can't play the violin in it."

In shopping for a long dress the other

week, however, I couldn't resist taking a halter dress to the fitting room with me.

"What holds it up?" I asked the salesperson.

"Gravity and prayer... not necessarily in that order."

"I see. The earth revolves and draws all the bodies in its sphere toward the centre of the earth at the rate of 32 feet per second and the dress stays up."

"That's easy for you to say," she said.

"Personally, I'm holding out for prayer."

"What do you think?" I asked, standing erect, not daring to breathe.

"I think the dress should sue you for non-support."

"Maybe I should go back to the keyhole neckline," I observed.

"I personally think you should seal off the entire chest," she said.

"Look, if Faye Dunaway can last through a cocktail party, a major fire, 35 explosions, smoke, water and a ride on a see-through elevator with a broken cable, I can handle this dress."

"I'll throw in an asbestos bra," she said tiredly.