

# Who has seen the wind?

*Who has seen the wind?*

*Neither you nor I:*

*But when the trees bow down their heads,*

*The wind is passing by.*

*'Who has seen the wind?'*

*by Christina Rossetti*

Perhaps I've always been ecocentric – by default – from my formative years on a semi-subsistence dairy farm in southern Ontario before pesticides, crop insurance, veterinarians and monoculture crops. We sold milk and a little veal off farm, but were self-reliant in meat, milk, eggs, most vegetables, water, apples and firewood. When a heifer couldn't come into calf she went into the freezer. When the chickens were spent they ended up on the dinner table. We worried endlessly about the weather.

As children, we did school projects on tree types, swam in local ponds, fished in creeks, picked wild strawberries, skated on flooded fields, loved songbirds, shot crows, tortured frogs and ants, trapped and drowned roving tomcats, flew homemade kites, shot groundhogs, stayed well back from rabid foxes and raccoons, and knew well the smell of skunks.

In the 1960s, farm teenagers were indentured servants, costing parents almost nothing, working like adults but only for room and board. Most activities were labour intensive: cows were mucked out with forks; milk carried in buckets; square hay bales lifted by hand; sheaves of grain were stoked in fields then fed into threshing machines with pitchforks.

Mine was the last generation to live on the land, to be of the land, to know the land; we predated cash-cropping,

combines, 1000-cow feedlots on 1000-acre farms. Our small fields were divided by hedgerows; our domestic animals ran with wild mammals; foxes raided our hen house; and many species of birds, amphibians and wild mammals raised their young in our pasture fields, along our fence lines, in our ephemeral wetlands, and in our woodlots. But by the end of the 1970s, rural depopulation had emptied the rambling farm houses of children. Mega-farms streamlined production and maximized productivity, putting all of nature into harness. Non-productive birds and animal were extirpated, large powerful machines eliminated woodlots, wetlands, fence lines and, along with it, the bulk of rural wild biodiversity.

If the lives of Canadian farm children of my generation were like those of authors WO Mitchell (*Who Has Seen the Wind*) and Wallace Stegner (*Wolf Willow*), this bucolic life all ended with the economic boom of the late 1960s. Ontario (and governments around the continent) borrowed heavily to build coal and nuclear power stations, freeways, universities and colleges to handle heavy immigration and the rural depopulation – which filled the new suburbs with citizens, who crammed the subways and freeways, rushing to careers in offices and factories. My six siblings and I all fled happily to the cities, barely giving our rural past a thought.

As ecocentric as my childhood was, I was also raised Catholic, and taught that the Earth was a disposable staging-ground for heaven; that my soul – not my earthly form or what nourished it – was where the action was. But though the priests and nuns explained that the Earth and all its miraculous biodiversity were of little consequence, it was too late. I was hooked

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### About the author

Frank is a Canadian politician and environmentalist.

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on the planet, and though I loved city life, for the next blissful decade I cycled in the countryside, and fell in love with canoeing and hiking, and had the euphoric feeling that all was well with the biosphere.

However, in the 1980s my illusions were shattered by my growing awareness of the Cold War and the ecological crisis and their litany of woes – the destruction of the ozone layer, the threat of nuclear war, pesticides, smog-induced asthma, nuclear power, militarization, the war on drugs, the cancer epidemic *etc.* – and as a result of either my strong Catholic sense of right and wrong, my love of my province and country, or just plain common sense, I joined the ranks of peace, social justice, green activists.

I loved being part of that nascent green movement. I felt community; I've never been a lonely ecologist. In the early 1990s I wrote:

Although writers like Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold had long written on the importance of living in balance with nature, the modern green movement started in Canada and around the world with the hippies in the 1960s. The hippy phenomenon, however, ended quickly because it had no structure or economic base, but the movement's life-affirming values didn't disappear as much as they went underground, and re-emerged in the 70s as isolated, small-scale enterprises and organizations such as health food stores, women's and environmental groups, renewable energy stores, organic farms. Though disparate, these groups gave the green movement structure and an economic life, and became integral to communities. The counterculture movement was the first mass rejection of consumer culture, and its rallying cries for peace, love and flower power eventually evolved into the Green Party values of non-violence, social justice and ecological thinking.

Dissatisfied with pressure groups, I threw myself into Green politics – excited and proud to be part of what I hoped was an international political movement that

would challenge and replace traditional political parties and usher in a new ecozoic era. I served as the leader of the Ontario Green Party for 17 years, leading the party through four elections and culminating in achieving 8% of the vote in 2007. Building the Green political alternative was the work of the angels.

I felt energized and powerful building and leading the local Green Party; I held fierce pride. But the process of electing actual Green politicians was painfully slow. Even in countries where they are significant, like Germany, positive change hasn't anywhere near kept up with negative developments. After two decades in Green politics, while it was heartening that so many people and governments were now thinking and talking along the lines of sustainability and conservation, the on-the-ground transition, by any yardstick, was happening excruciatingly slowly. There had to be a better approach.

Perhaps the problem was in our economic system rather than in human nature or politics. People and governments honestly wanted to go green, but the economic system rewarded the opposite. Government regulations prescribed sustainability but any effort was usually undermined by the tax and subsidy system, and all the while more nature was sacrificed.

In 2005, after much research, I joined an obscure economics think-tank that promotes the work of the 19th century US economist Henry George. His core idea was that governments should be financed by collecting economic rent instead of by taxing incomes, business and consumption. Economic rent refers to revenue without a corresponding cost of production, the societal surplus that flows to monopoly-held assets like land, resources (oil, trees, water), the privilege to pollute, billboards, the stock market, the electromagnetic spectrum, agricultural quotas, taxi medallions *etc.* Though this wealth rightfully belongs to the community, at present it mostly flows untaxed to private asset owners, forcing governments to finance themselves by damaging the economy by taxing incomes and sales.

My thinking was that this economic programme would right-price nature, reward innovation and thus reverse the despoliation of the commons, the Earth. But even though this economic approach has the potential simultaneously to address productivity, wealth disparity and the ecological imperative, and was supported by classical economists (including Adam Smith, David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill), prominent people (like Winston Churchill, Sun Yet-Sen and Mark Twain) and modern economic thinkers (including Joseph Stiglitz, Milton Friedman, Michael Hudson, Herman Daly and George Monbiot), it is still almost unknown and unlikely to be implemented in time to stave off the collapse of the biosphere.

Why are there so abysmally few ecological citizens? Why are we collectively oblivious to the fact that we depend on a healthy biosphere for our existence? The vast majority of people abdicate their responsibility to authorities who

are elected and appointed to be forward-thinking guardians – but ensuring their own re-election requires that such guardians pander to endless consumer demands, sacrificing more of the Earth at every turn. So perhaps the problem is political after all.

I now hold only a faint hope that humans will one day learn to live in balance with nature. It's probably too late to turn the juggernaut of present-day attitudes around; it appears doubtful humans will last out the 21st century. I'm now psychologically prepared for the collapse of the biosphere within my lifetime. I know my view is shared with many, and I, like most of them, will continue the struggle only because I have no choice. ■

#### References

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