

COMMENT

Threats of violence, like violence, undermine the rule of law. Threats of violence take away free choice and undermine freedom of action. They undermine the very values and social conditions that are necessary for the continued existence of freedom of expression.

A RULING OF THE SUPREME COURT OF CANADA THAT UNANIMOUSLY DECLARED CANADA'S ANTI-TERROR LAW TO BE CONSTITUTIONAL.

Parliament Hill standouts made 2012 their year



CHANTAL HÉBERT

OTTAWA The Green party gave the NDP and the Liberals a neck cramp this fall. But it was not because Elizabeth May forced her opposition rivals to spend a byelection campaign looking over their shoulders in Victoria and Calgary Centre that she was selected by her peers as the 2012 Maclean's/L'Actualité Parliamentarian of the Year.

She may be a one-woman show on the Hill but May's undeniable impact on parliamentary life is a timely reminder that, at the best of times, the House of Commons is more than just the sum of 308 indistinguishable (and sometimes undistinguished) partisan bodies.

Here are six others whose voices made a difference over the past year.

■ **Bob Rae:** The Liberal interim leader renounced his last shot at becoming prime minister when he took himself out of the leadership lineup last spring. Then he continued to get up every morning to go to work at keeping the third-place Liberal party relevant in the Commons.

The upside of Rae's steadfast performance is that the next Liberal leader will inherit a party that has neither fallen off the parliamentary radar nor ended up all over the legislative map.

The downside is that he or she will have an extremely tough act to follow.

Many New Democrats breathed a not-so-quiet sigh of relief when Thomas Mulcair took over the reins from rookie interim leader Nycole Turmel earlier this year. Cold sweat on the Liberal benches is more likely to attend the transition from Rae to a permanent successor to Michael Ignatieff.

■ **Peter Julian:** If voters are to come to see the NDP as a government-in-waiting, it will have to showcase a credible cabinet-in-waiting. In his strategic position as energy and natural resources critic, the industrious Julian has a major role in the New Democrat makeover and over the fall session the bilingual MP from Burnaby-New Westminster has more than risen to the challenge.

■ **Alexandre Boulerice:** When Liberal strategists worry about the potential staying power of the NDP on their party's former Quebec turf, it is because of recruits such as Boulerice. The only Quebec MP to have made the Maclean's/L'Actualité honour list — albeit in the second runner-up spot as most promising rising star — the articulate MP for Rosemont-La Petite Patrie is one of the many keepers in the NDP's 2011 election crop in Quebec.

■ **Gordon O'Connor:** When the abortion issue predictably landed on the lap of the first Conservative majority government in two decades, no one expected a 70-something retired general to deliver the most forceful defence of a woman's right to choose to terminate a pregnancy a cabinet minister has ever put forward. Stephen Harper's chief government whip did just that last spring. Little could have made clearer the prime minister's intention to keep the issue off the agenda of Parliament.

■ **Jason Kenney:** In the corner opposite O'Connor on abortion rights, the immigration minister broke ranks with Harper on the issue. That vote firmed up Kenney's status as the leading social conservative in cabinet — a title previously held by former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day. It also ensured that if Kenney runs as Harper's eventual successor, the abortion debate will be front and centre in the Conservative leadership campaign.

■ **Maxime Bernier:** When the MP from Beauce was brought back in the cabinet after the last election, his return was expected to spell an end to his policy excursions off the beaten government path. But when the NDP presented a bill designed to ensure that all future officers of Parliament — from the auditor general to the chief electoral officer — be fluently bilingual, Bernier lined up behind it and the government had to reconsider its opposition to the measure.

Not all of Bernier's Conservative colleagues are grateful for that but then neither are the Parti Québécois strategists who are on the lookout for a showdown with the Harper government. The sight of Parliament failing to walk the talk of official bilingualism is never very far from the top of the list of Canada-Quebec irritants.

Chantal Hébert is a national-affairs columnist.

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Teachers' unions standing up for us all

Cancellation of extracurriculars is not as vital as the cancellation of the democratic process



DEIRDRE PIKE

I can still remember Miss Phillips, my Grade 6 math teacher, standing in front of us that September, trying to explain the difference between a strike in baseball and the kind of strike our teachers might be going on that fall.

The only message I took home from that lesson was the potential joy of missing school for a few weeks while the teachers did this striking thing. Sounded good to me.

I did not grow up in a union family. My dad and mom were small business owners. None of my jobs ever brought me union membership. The first Labour Day parade I ever saw was the September we moved to Hamilton in 1993. I laughed as it passed by, wondering what kind of a parade this was with only three marching bands and a whole bunch of men, mostly, in matching T-shirts.

I was unaware about the important role unions played throughout history. Like many people, I just heard complaints about powerful unions demanding too much money and driving poor business owners and the government into bankruptcy. I dwelled in my ignorance without understanding the larger context and the greater good.

Thankfully, I had a conversion. Could have been through one of this city's greatest treasures, the Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre, or through the patient education of so many strong labour activists I've met in the last few years. However it happened, I have a lot more understanding.

So when Ontario's teachers started talking about the harm Bill 115 would bring to workers across this province, I knew it was important to listen.

There are a lot of myths circulating about teachers and what's behind the work stoppages of the past, and coming, weeks. I've heard people saying this is just about money and teachers are too greedy. The fact is both elementary and secondary unions have already agreed to a wage freeze.

It's also important to note this isn't just about teachers. It's also about educational support staff, the majority of whom are women, some barely making \$30,000 a year. Bill 115 goes after wages and benefits, the very things labour has sought to improve in order to keep women out of poverty.

Bill 115 also supports the Liberal government's unprecedented power move to take away the workers' right to strike and the employers' right to lock out, two essential tools in the process of negotiation. These tools are enshrined in the Ontario Labour Relations Act, the act that applies to each of us as workers.

Many students already know that. I've heard them articulating support for their teachers from across Ontario, and calling on the government to protect democratic rights and to “Kill Bill 115.”

I am grateful to the teachers' unions for standing up for their members and for all of us against this dangerous bill. With the privilege and resources they have as a strong collective, they have taken on an ethical responsibility to speak out for all Ontarians and it's not the first time.

These are the same unions that have put financial and human resources behind living wage campaigns even though the workers they represent already earn a living wage.

And now a word about the extra-curricular activities that teachers and educational support workers volunteer to lead. That's right, volunteer on top of the work they're hired to do.

Yes, sports and drama clubs are an important part of school life for many students and it will be difficult to lose access to these benefits temporarily. I also care deeply that LGBTQ youth may not have access to their Positive Space support groups and that student nutrition programs that feed 23,000 students a day may not run.

However, I think it's a very dangerous message to send our youth that the cancellation of these programs is more important than the cancellation of the democratic process and the rights of workers' to bargain with their employers.

One more message that is disconcerting. Somehow this conversation about austerity has us all looking up at those who are doing better and trying to pull them down instead of fighting for each of us to be raised up. I am standing in solidarity with the teachers because I believe they work to raise everyone up through their vocation and through their unions.

Deirdre Pike lives in Hamilton's Strathcona neighbourhood. She can be reached at dpikeatthespec@gmail.com

“This isn't just about teachers. It's also about educational support staff, the majority of whom are women, some barely making \$30,000 a year.”

Once, there was a poor, young girl ...

A story about Hannah and about Mary and about 75 million others

THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA Once there was a little Ugandan girl who loved school.

The girl, who had been an orphan when she was younger, loved learning new things and making new friends and pretty well everything about it, especially the stories.

Maybe she loved school all the more because of her years as an orphan, which started in a hospital in Mbarara, in western Uganda, where she was left abandoned when she was barely larger than a cat.

There she was given all she ever owned, her name, Hannah. Then she went to an orphanage some hours away. Over and over, the girl watched children leave with their new-found parents, this boy holding that hand, that girl getting a new life in a different direction.

One day, sometime after they guessed it was her third birthday, Hannah also left the orphanage while holding the hands of her new parents. As it turned out, they had previously promised each other that if Providence ever granted them another girl, they would surely name her Hannah.

“Mommy, daddy, brother, sister,” Hannah said, when her new family asked what gift she enjoyed the most after her first Christmas with them.

This is the story of Hannah Froese, a Ugandan girl who has now been in my family for three years. It comes to mind for two reasons.

First, because I don't need to tell you that plenty of girls in developing nations like Uganda will never get a chance at decent schooling. Instead they're too often up at sunrise getting water or firewood or having the weight of motherhood forced on them at far too young an age.

“A crisis in education” is what the recently released State of the World's Girls 2012 calls it. The report states that 75 million school-age girls are now out of school. These girls come from homes with not only too little money, but too much violence, along with the attitude that a girl is just a girl.

Yes, too many of the world's girls are seen as expendable second-class citizens. The older they get, the less they need schooling. Send them for chores. Marry them off. And the cycle of poverty continues.

The other reason Hannah's story comes to mind is because it's Christmas. And Christmas, it seems to me, has something to say about all this.

Christmas reminds us that even a poor girl has more value than anyone might imagine. Even a



THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR
Hannah Froese is now seven years old.

poor girl can accomplish great things if given the chance. Even a poor girl, can, in fact, be visited by angels and hand-picked to lead God's biggest mission.

Yes, once there was a poor girl. And God had big plans for her.

People didn't give her much of a chance. Didn't think she'd amount to much. Gave her sideways glances and whispered behind her back. Said she was a girl of ill repute. But that poor girl became a great blessing even to our time. Because God literally dwelt in her.

Now it's Christmas, that time for children and those who have become like children to enter into this, God's kingdom. “Let the children come to me,” is how Jesus put it. “Let them hear my stories.”

And what stories they are. Once upon a time there was a lost son. Once upon a time a man bought an entire field for its small hidden treasure. Once upon a time a king threw a party.

Of course, these stories are not about some strangers way out there somewhere. No, they're about us. You and me. They're about plain people and common days.

Indeed, once upon a time a simple virgin gave birth. And once upon a time God loved. He loved so much that he adopted us — dirty-faced kids that we are — not because of anything we could ever do to deserve it, but just because this is what we needed.

And, yes, once upon a time a girl in Uganda went to school. And she loved stories, and read in bed with her little flashlight, and dreamt her own outlandish dreams because nobody ever told her that she couldn't. Nobody ever said no. Nobody ever that said she wasn't worth it.

And the world was changed.

Author and journalist Thomas Froese is a Hamiltonian based in Africa most of the year. Visit his website at thomasfroese.com

SPEC

BRIEFLY

Short and excerpted comments sent to letters@thespec.com

Hoax call was just a harmless prank

Like many other people, I've been following the story of the DJs' hoax call to the hospital about the Duchess of Cambridge's condition. Everyone feels for the nurse who took her own life and her family, especially at this time of year. But it was just a harmless prank. You would think Kate is the only woman to ever get pregnant, let alone have morning sickness. Realistically, the nurse must have had some deep-seated issues that led to her apparent suicide. She mistakenly put a call through. Big deal. I'm sure many receptionists reading this have done the same, without the same dire consequences. The Brits have to suck it up, move on and focus on the economy instead of the world's only pregnancy and what is likely a mental problem.

STEVEN HILL,
BURLINGTON

Border-guard tags a dumb idea

When you put a name tag on a border guard, you make it easy for an enemy state or criminal organization to target the border guard through social media. This is not the way to go. Some soft-headed government official is out to lunch with this idea, particularly after a young border guard gal took a bullet for Canada a month or so ago at the Peace Arch crossing in B.C. A border guard simply should not be named in public. Canada's security is uppermost. Somebody has a bad idea. Get rid of the people who come up with these warm and fuzzy ideas. We are in a real world.

WAYNE ROBERTSON,
HAMILTON

Selling Nexen is a stupid move

Prime Minister Stephen Harper is dis-regarding and/or ignoring the wishes of most Canadian citizens. We did not want to sell Nexen to China's state-owned oil company CNOOC, and pardon my bluntness, but that was a stupid move. I beg Harper not to add damage to our economic situation through the Canada-China Foreign Investment Protection Act. He must start listening to the majority.

MELISSA PARENT,
HAMILTON