



A Human Future

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Jacques Dufresne, well-known Quebec philosopher and social commentator, is director of *L'Encyclopédie de L'Agora*, on the Internet, and editor of *La Lettre de L'Agora*, an online publication of ideas and debate. He is co-creator with L'Arche Canada and the PLAN Institute of *Appartenance-Belonging.org*. He is a founder of *Pbilias.ca*, a resource on Caring Citizenship. He is a thought-provoking author, journalist and lecturer, long at the centre of Quebec social debate on diverse issues. He did his doctoral work on Simone Weil.

Understanding Quebec: What Other Canadians Should Know

An Interview with Jacques Dufresne

For some 40 years Jacques Dufresne has been an important leader and contributor to intellectual life in Quebec. In this issue, he broadens our understanding and deepens the conversation about a movement that some Canadians outside Quebec have dismissed, and that among others has aroused ire, bewilderment, and sometimes, support. He points to the implicit call to address 21st century inadequacies in traditional representative democracy, and he suggests possibilities for a hopeful outcome after the protests.

– Beth Porter, ed.

Beth Porter: The continuing student protests don't make much sense to many Canadians outside Quebec, even students. What is it we don't get?

Jacques Dufresne: I understand how they feel, because obviously this long strike is out of all proportion to the tuition increase. But Quebec students remember that their grandfathers at the end of the 50s, in the Quiet Revolution, chose a social democratic state where education would be free. Most Quebec citizens enjoyed this free access to university. The fees began to rise again in the 80s and late 90s. Also, it may be helpful to understand that Quebec youth are more politically active. Youth wings of political parties are much stronger. About a third of youth here are politically engaged.

One of the best articles I've read was, surprisingly, in the *Toronto Star*. It asked: Should our students have accepted the

North American philosophy about education fees? Because there is a choice. They all know that in France, Switzerland, and in Norway and Sweden to which Quebec often compares itself, students pay little or nothing and sometimes are paid to study. The government says we have to follow the North American model for economic reasons, but the students might have good reasons to say that this is not an inevitability. I think we are touching something important here. Too many people in our society no longer hold hope that politics can influence the economy. I also was among those who thought this increase was unavoidable. The students remind all of us, not only the government, that something else is possible.

There is a clash between two expressions of democracy...

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I like that because it's a sign of life.

How much has to do with a political system that is not working?

Our friend André Mathieu, who teaches at the University of Sherbrooke, points out that there is a clash between two models of democracy—direct, participative democracy and traditional representative democracy. There are good reasons to think along these lines. For instance, imagine our representatives in the 19th century when our democracy took shape: They went to the parliament in Quebec City or Montreal and they would not hear about their constituents for months. They were closer to their colleagues in parliament than to their electors. Today, with instant communication, what we have seen so far in this strike is that direct democracy is winning over representative democracy. But this is not reassuring! If “the street” is right, what will the future be?

Who are the protesters?

It's a little difficult to know. I don't think there is a separatist element though the movement could be transformed into that. The Arab Spring is an inspiration for some. Also, the Occupy movement. And there is anti-capitalism, but most of the students have not put the emphasis on that. The unions are supporting the students, but if it is a communist protest it is very weak, because they know the tuition fees are not very high. The most active students are trying to link all the movements. One of our friends says many of her students, who include engineers and architects working on higher degrees, support the protests. These students are bright, know what they want, and are not at all spoiled, as some people say. Many cannot find a regular job, but they continue to dream of real sustainable development. However, we must be careful about any interpretation because the students, especially in recent weeks, were helped by the unions. The unions will have to renew their contracts with the govern-

ment. An important unknown is what the students may have promised the union leaders. In France in 1968, when the students and the unions went into the streets together, there was much violence.

What are the protesters hoping for?

If we listen only to what the student leaders say in public, it seems simple. They always speak about the fees. The students sense their political strength. They hope for a victory against a government seen

Robert Huish: Teaching Activism



“What is an activist? It's not some guy dressed in black, burning down a police car,” says Dr. Huish. “An activist is anyone in a democratic society who is willing to engage their institutions, their elected officials—anyone in power—to express their message, to question and to try and

develop change. That really comes down to some fundamentals of a democratic society.” (From the course description on “Development and Activism” that Dr. Huish teaches at Dalhousie)

“Much social progress in the 20th century has been the result of well-organized citizens' movements—women suffragettes, the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and other non-violent dissent. From Martin Luther on up to Martin Luther King the university has played a role in facilitating activism and public dissent that in turn has played a role in shaping society. Our course on Development and Activism teaches students the role of activism and protest in social change. It fosters critical reflection and offers a space where students can position themselves. They should know many avenues for activism including how to engage politicians and how to write a good letter to the editor.”

Adapted from an interview with Anna Maria Tremonti on CBC Radio One's *The Current*, May 30, 2012.



as corrupt, and they are standing their ground, as we saw in the breaking off of talks again recently. The students won a real advantage two days after the government passed Bill 78, when many other people took to the streets banging pots and pans because aspects of the bill were too extreme. It is a dangerous situation when a government makes a law that cannot be approved, because it could be the beginning of a situation where no law is respected any longer. Happily, there has not so far been serious violence, but that very fact has a dangerous aspect to it because it gives legitimacy to the street. On May 22nd, more than 200,000 people demonstrated in Montreal. When you listen to these people, not only the tuition hike but other issues come up: the environment, democracy—meaning corruption and recent scandals, and also the fact that this government has been in power for almost ten years. They want something—change—but they seem not to know to precisely what. They speak about empowerment.

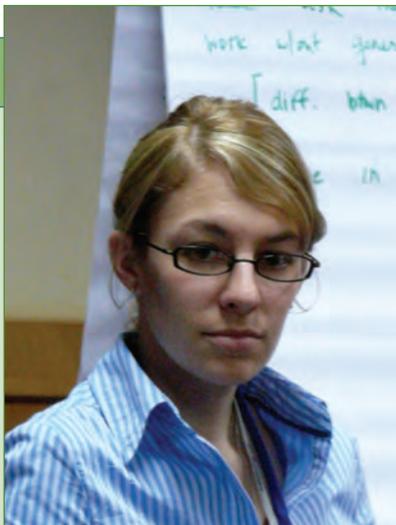
Sometimes it seems we are in Huxley's *Brave New World*, where people are obeying because they enjoy

many superficial freedoms, but some of them begin to wake up and they say, we are not completely dead. We can do something together as citizens. We can be powerful! This could be the most important aspect of all this. It is partly a dream of course, but people are speaking to their neighbours and they understand that things changed completely when they went into the street. They don't want at all to use their power in violent ways. We have spoken often of *philia*, the friendship that makes a community, and sometimes I feel that all this is a kind of rebirth of *philia*. My hope—and many share this—is that all this activity will continue into a deeper dialogue when the problem of the fees is settled, that we try to give a meaning to all this, if only to avoid the street becoming the solution.

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What would you like to see come from such dialogue?

I hope we will find ways, formal or informal, to talk about what has happened and to raise the real issues.



Jessica Vorstermans: A New Paradigm for Sustainability

(Background: On September 28, 2008, the people of Ecuador voted by an overwhelming majority (64%) to approve the new constitution codifying a new system of environmental protection based on rights. Ecuador recognizes the Rights of Nature.)

When we think of rights, we usually think of political and social rights, but the concept

of the Rights of Nature and *buen vivir*, which can be translated “living a good life,” is based not on individual rights but on living within our means and on a more equitable sharing of resources. The concept has indigenous roots in Ecuador

and other South American countries and is not imposed; it is not colonial in origin.

Rather than placing emphasis on the dominant societal economic paradigm with which we are familiar, this approach to sustainable development places emphasis on the human being and nature. This emphasis on quality of life for all and the respect for nature that is a critical element of *buen vivir* speaks to the essence of the critical study of disability and disablement. There is an affinity between recognizing the rights of our natural environment and the rights of persons who are born with a disability. People who are born with a disability are often viewed as “not natural” in our society, but *buen vivir*, rather than devaluing those with a disability, supports the naturalness or normalcy of members of humanity who have a disability.

Jessica Vorstermans is a doctoral student in Critical Disability Studies at York University. She is presenting this month at a conference called by the Ecuador government to bring together activists and scholars. [Read more.](#)



For instance, let's take advantage of the situation to establish a better balance between services for the young and services for the old. For the past 10 years every increase in the health care budget has been approved. An example of waste is the recent announcement that PSA screening for prostate cancer is ineffective. I have long argued against PSA testing. The money spent on those tests could have covered the tuition increase. My feeling is the older people in our society, the boomers, are out of proportion rich compared to the young. For instance, rather than old people going on cruises, our society would benefit more if young families could make a cultural trip.

Second, there is a close link between the students and other groups around ecology and sustainability. At one point in April, there was an important meeting in Montreal about the huge northern Quebec natural resources project. Two groups—the students and young people wanting a job in the North—were demonstrating. The two lines crossed and some feared a battle between them, but that did not happen. My dream is that we will be intellectually strong enough to do what they are doing for example in Ecuador, where they invented the concept of the Rights of Nature. A good outcome of all this would be that we could end up with a sustainable plan for our natural resources, more like that of Norway or Sweden. ■

For Your Information

Links

- Video of spontaneous pots and pans protests in Montreal

Resources in French

- Encyclopédie de l'Agora
- Andrée Mathieu: "Directe, indirecte: le choc des démocraties"
- Works by and about Jacques Dufresne
- Other online resources edited by Jacques Dufresne: www.appartenance-belonging.org (bilingual)
L'Encyclopédie de la francophonie
L'Encyclopédie de l'inaptitude (partly bilingual)
L'Encyclopédie sur la mort
- The journal "Philo & Cie" janvier-avril 2012, has a very nice tribute to Jacques Dufresne, pp. 64-67.

English links

- From the *Guardian*: "Quebec government under pressure as Canada's 'casserole protests' expand, Draconian emergency bill introduced to stifle student protests has 'politicised' ordinary Canadians say opponents" by Adam Gabbatt in Montreal
- Judy Rebbick: Rabble.ca
- Much of this article can be taken to heart by "oldsters" across Canada, not only in Ontario: "What Ontario's oldsters can learn from Quebec's youngsters," by Martin Regg Cohn, *Toronto Star*, June 3.
- For an article explaining Ecuador's policy on ecology, sustainability, and the Rights of Nature, see the website of the Heinrich Böll Foundation

www.larche.ca/en/inspiration



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

A Human Future is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.