

Dear Judith,

It's snowing up a storm here, the calling card of Canadian winter, and Revenue Canada has sent me their annual seasonal greeting, encouraging me not to miss the opportunity to deposit some money with them. That got me to thinking about value for money that I send, give, or otherwise funnel to governments.

Now, I want to be clear that I am not one of those right wing radicals who thinks that less government is better government. I find those "Back Off, Government" posters occasionally seen on farmers' fences to be distasteful, or, more accurately, probably fruitless. On the other hand, I am not a Communist who thinks that all should contribute according to their means to everyone else according to their needs. I just get a bit concerned about value for money, especially when it's my money going to government.

I went to buy some bus tickets the other day. I use our local public transport system because I believe in the concept. The purchase price for a sheet of tickets had gone up. Then I found that the number of tickets on a sheet had been reduced. I felt that this was a low blow, a bit sneaky, in fact. Then, when I checked the bus schedule, I found that the service at my local bus stop had been cut in about half. So, the hit was more than a one-two punch. It was more like "one-two-three, sock-it-to-me". Now I find I tend to avoid taking a more expensive and less convenient bus. Is this what the eco-planners wanted?

Our municipality recently embarked on a scheme to gather compost material from houses. Bins were delivered to your house, whether you wanted one or not, and then, almost to everyone's amazement, a tax increment fee was instituted. Now, we all know intuitively that somebody has to pay for these programs. But the weird thing is that not everyone who pays gets the program. And those who already compost at home cannot refuse to pay. And, to top it off, the folks who process the compost will sell the finished garden dressing back to us. Their paying customers will include those of us who spent the time to sort our garbage, clean the cans and deliver it to the curb.

A warm and fuzzy feeling about doing good things for the planet wears thin when you are elbow deep in a smelly mess, scraping the remnants of last week's dinner off the interior of a frozen bin. Where is the value in that?

Lately, we have been bombarded about the controversy over the Harmonized Sales Taxes. Lord knows, I have tried to follow the debate in the Press about the rationale for and the arguments against its introduction. I'm all for simplifying the administration of tax collecting. We are told that the advantage to businesses will be that tax preparation work will be reduced. Redundant taxes will be eliminated. This should result in less overhead costs and subsequent savings passed on to consumers.

At the risk of sounding cynical, do we really expect that consumers will see that trickle-down effect? Perhaps we will. I hope that the economists are right. I only know that my barber has already told me that the price of a haircut is going up next summer because he has to begin charging tax then. So, all the high-minded economic explanations in the world are going to have a hard time countering my perception every time I will see an outflow of money each time I buy newly taxed goods or services. Sorry, maybe that's irrational but it's just that simple for most of us.

To really set off alarm bells, this is the season a lot of auditors-general deliver their reports. These litanies of waste, mismanagement and sometimes downright criminal fraud so often seem to be a big yawn. Oh, yes, they get headlines for about a day before a fickle Press moves on to some celebrity scandal. But the next round of horror shows are all too often the same old scams, only the names changed to incriminate some other not-so-innocent bureaucrat or government department.

Only rarely do we hear of somebody being charged with an offence, or taken to court, or summarily dismissed. It seems to me that AG reports might carry a bit more weight if we had a couple of good, old fashioned tarring and feathering parties. Or maybe a "drumming out" ceremony in a public park with the offending Deputy Minister or municipal department head having their pens broken over their knee, the buttons snipped off the vest of their three-piece suit and their departmentally-provided Blackberry ground underfoot.

Perhaps it's just Seasonal Affective Disorder that's putting me in a bad mood. Or maybe I'm just disgruntled by the fact that I have to send my tax return to Shawinigan (merci, Mr. Chretien!!) so that somebody there can send the money back to Ottawa to the Revenue Department just a few blocks away from where I live. Or maybe these are just the musings of a Doddering Old Man who is past his best-before date.

Yours truly,  
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