

McDemocracy Served up in Quebec City

A Mennonite's Teary-Eyed Reflections on the FTAA
Will Braun, May 2001

"**B**ow your heads; the corporations will now lead us in prayer" read the sign of the clean-cut man I saw on a Quebec City street. Apparently, the brand of prayer meeting to which he referred required a mask and goggles. His sign was typical of the creative irreverence shown toward the concentration of politico-corporate power behind the guarded fence at the April 20-22 Summit of the Americas where 34 heads of state discussed the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

With scores of masked riot police in front of me and searing tear gas blurring my vision I asked myself why I, as a

Corporocracy'

Most FTAA opponents would not say that trade is bad. The concerns are that corporations will have increased power to challenge laws pertaining to health, safety and environmental standards. My fear is that the "free" in FTAA is about freeing huge companies from the encumbrances' of laws protecting societal well-being.

The FTAA could also lead to a systematic privatization of virtually all public services. Binding FTAA regulations would put most government spending up for grabs, with governments unable to give preference to public or local providers. Health care and day care would stand to become growth industries, with large American firms well positioned to move in on southern markets.

The impingement of corporate interest on the democratic process represents an era of "corporocracy" that deserves our attention as Christians who care about how

Fumigating Dissension

Asquad of masked riot police stood in a church cemetery facing us threateningly. I wondered whether they thought about where they were, and what in the world they were trying to prove. Though the intimidation factor of riot police a few metres away is significant, at that point I felt like their moral authority had gone up in smoke and they were just ridiculous bullies in search of legitimacy. It was as if the unwarranted and unrelenting tear gas assault - often on people posing no threat - was Mr. Chrétien's attempt at fumigating public dissension, a fundamental element of a fair society.

Though I have deep misgivings about the bottle-tossing, fire-lighting element, as well as the media's inability to distinguish between the sensational and the significant, I think we were effective in demonstrating that those in power have something to hide.

"good non-violent Christian" was out on the same streets as the black-clad, overly-pierced protesters who starred in the media version of the tear gas summit. I've never considered myself a "protester" and I don't like the word activist, but with each canister of tear gas that went off, I was increasingly convinced that situations requiring protective gear are likely situations requiring a prayerful Christian presence.

The media tempted us to form reactionary opinions based on images of anarchist anger. The potential implications of the FTAA for vulnerable people throughout the Americas require a deeper look.

systems affect the lives of disadvantaged people.

The placard in the hands of a 40-plus Christian Reformed man read "Survival of the Richest: FTAA." The notion of free trade conjures images of open season for corporations. Trade is about competition. Competitions have winners and losers. Can we trust that a commercial free-for-all - a form of economic Darwinism - will serve the interests of "the least of these"?

Trade has certain benefits. But if the primary goal is equality, is the best option for achieving those goals a competitive exchange of commodities in a climate dominated by corporations, many of which have shady track records? Do we believe that economic salvation will be brought to the Americas by Wal-Mart, Visa and Egg McMuffins?

Some people justified police actions by asking what all those anti-authoritarians would have done had there been no police force. The answer is simple. The authorities should have engaged in an open, transparent process which gave preference to civil society groups rather than corporate elites who literally bought their way inside the fence. (There was no security required for the People's Summit, down the hill from the fence.) The secrecy, the fence, the police posturing before the summit and aggression during the summit were provocation of a juvenile manner. Authorities could have hardly done more to provoke harsh response.

While the hooliganism was reprehensible, the worst violence is the economic marginalization and re-colonization of poorer peoples by an emerging politico-economic system which has a tendency to put profits before people.

Who's in, Who's out?

The Summit raised questions about inclusion. Who is included in the process of establishing the FTAA, and who will be included in its benefits? For whom is the FTAA being created?

After my experience of chain-link democracy I will stand with those who refuse to be mesmerized by economic

indicators; those who insist that there are public priorities greater than trade and commerce. I will increase efforts to bring my consumer habits in line with my actions in Quebec. And I will pray for better ways of addressing inequality and suffering than 'corporocracy'.

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