

ANOTHER MODEST PROPOSAL
(with apologies to Mr. Swift)

A satirical essay on the collective bargaining process

Shaun Belding
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Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Simon LaGuerre. I am an efficiency consultant recently contracted by the Canadian Government, and am currently on a global fact-finding mission to observe and learn from other countries' practices and systems.

I have recently made a discovery; the magnitude of which cannot be understated. So relevant is it to Canada and the current challenges facing our great country, that I could not wait until filing my full report. My understanding is that, back home, labour unrest is wreaking havoc on people's lives. University students are being kept from their schooling, commuters in our nation's capital are gridlocked, and there are rumours that even more issues are forthcoming.

With your permission, therefore, I would like to relate my story to you. I am confident that it will fill your heart with hope, as it has mine.

As you would expect, my first visit was to the diminutive country of Gleichnis, nestled in the Central Eastern Alps, bordering on Switzerland, Austria and Liechtenstein. Albeit tiny – not even appearing on most maps – it is the undisputed authority on progressive governance. The efficiency and effectiveness of its systems is legendary, and even the Swiss and Germans, it is said, defer to Gleichnisians when it comes to the best way to do things.

The story begins with my journey to Gleichnis. Apparently not only is this tiny nation too miniscule to show on most maps, it is too mountainous to permit a landing strip for even the smallest of aircraft. So my greatest challenge was getting there. It was only through a complex combination of planes and trains that I finally arrived.

To my great surprise, when I stepped off of the final train I was immediately met by The Directorate – the supreme leader of Gleichnis – himself. There he stood in an immaculately pressed suit and winter coat, white scarf and silver-grey hair. Beside him stood his trusted aid, Marcus, holding up a bold sign bearing my name.

The introductions were efficiently conducted, hands were shaken all around, Marcus retrieved my luggage, and we departed the station. But we did not, as I had would have thought, proceed to a waiting limousine. Instead, we walked up a wide flight of stairs and into a large, brightly-lit cable-car station.

I confess that I had not done my due diligence prior to my journey to Gleichnis. If I had, I would have known that this mountainous country did not have any real roads to speak of. Instead, homes, communities, subdivisions and downtown core are all interlinked by a remarkably complex network of cable-cars.

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When we entered to station, I was immediately struck by the technology which surrounded me. Five cable-cars departed from this single location in five different directions. Large plasma screens overhead announced when each car was going to be expected to arrive and depart – even though there was no more than a 3 minute interval between cars. Status reports were available on the entire network throughout the country.

In the centre were a large number of touch screens graphically displaying the network. Touch on your ultimate destination, and immediately the most efficient way to get there would be calculated. The cable-car stations at which you needed to transfer glowed on the screen. One press of the “accept” icon, and your tickets magically appeared, complete with a detailed printout of your journey. No need for a credit card - your fingerprints had already been recorded from the touchscreen, and your account was automatically debited. Marvelous! Moments later we were on the cable-car, and after twenty minutes and two transfers, we were walking into the front doors of the Executive Office of The Directorate.

It was shortly after, when we exited the elevator to the fifth floor, that I first heard the screams. Bloodcurdling, piercing screams echoing in the halls. The sound of an individual so clearly in agony that it made my heart begin to pound. Then the wailing stopped, and was replaced by a loud and continuous sobbing. Concerned, I turned to The Directorate, but if he had heard the sound, he gave no indication. He began to casually walk down an adjacent hallway toward his office, ignoring my wide-eyed confusion.

I must confess to being a little distracted in our subsequent meeting. Despite a well insulated office, the alternating shrieks and sobs still filtered through, and it was most difficult to concentrate. I did my best, though, and was relieved to find that the awful cries ceased just as we broke for lunch. I took this moment to delicately enquire.

“Oh, yes!” The Directorate said apologetically, “I’m sorry you had to come at a time that we were having some labour disputes. They are most unpleasant, but seemingly unavoidable – even in our humble little country.”

“Labour dispute?” I asked incredulously. “it sounded more like an individual in agony!” The Directorate nodded in agreement, and offered no further explanation. I looked at him somewhat askance, but ceased my questioning since it was apparent this was not a topic of interest to him.

During our lunch, I got to witness the most efficient of cafeterias. I was amazed at how effortlessly they processed the hundreds of civil servants. The food was outstanding, and I felt like we were more in a fine dining establishment than a government facility. I dutifully noted this for my log and subsequent report. We can indeed learn much from these people.

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Just as we were finishing, Marcus appeared and briefly whispered in the Directorate's ear. "Ah! Yes." The Directorate said, nodding to his assistant. He then turned to me and said, "It is time for us to choose our next citizen. Would you care to join me? It should only take a few moments."

I agreed of course, although I did not really know what he was referring to. My job, after all, is to observe. I followed them through the halls and into a large, brightly lit office in the North-East corner of the building. The room was mostly empty, with nothing but a single chair in the middle and two women and a man in genial, casual conversation by a large plate-glass window.

As we entered, one of the women, clearly the senior person there, turned to my host with a gracious smile and said, "Directorate."

"Chief Steward," The Directorate responded with a smile. He then gestured to me and said, "Chief Steward, I would like to introduce you to Mr. Simon LaGuerre. He is here to learn of some of our efficiency initiatives."

"Mr. LaGuerre, this is Chief Steward of the United Cable Car Collective."

We shook hands and I said, "UCCC?" pronouncing it as though it were a word. The Chief Steward gave me a chagrined smile. "We sort of shy away from using the acronym," she said. I nodded sympathetically.

Turning to The Directorate, the Chief Steward said, "Shall we?"

The Directorate nodded, and the two walked over to the windows, and peered down at the walkway below. It was bustling with people on their lunchtime break.

"I believe it is your turn?" said The Directorate to the Chief Steward.

"It is," the Chief Steward acknowledged. "How about that fellow there?" She pointed to a youngish red-headed man with a heavy wool coat and black fur cap. The Directorate nodded his approval and made a gesture to Marcus. Marcus hit the speed-dial button on his cell phone, and simply said, "Male. Red hair. Late twenties. Black wool top coat and hat."

Watching the scene below, I was astonished to see two burly men materialize onto the walkway, grab the young man by the elbows, and quickly and efficiently carry him into the building. The expression on his face was an understandable combination of shock and fear. He tried to resist, but was no match for the two large gentlemen on their mission.

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I looked questioningly at The Directorate and Chief Steward, but no one was paying attention to me. After a couple of minutes of silence, the elevator door chimed, followed by the two men ushering their captive into the office.

He was quickly seated in the empty chair with his wrists and ankles bound by shackles I had not previously noticed. "I demand to know what's going on here!" he blustered defiantly to everyone in the room, trying to extricate himself from his bonds. "You can't do this!" His protestations stopped as he recognized the Directorate who had stepped before him.

"What is your name, citizen?" The Directorate gently enquired.

"John," came the reply. "John Quincy. Look, what is going on here?"

"I'm afraid, John, that you have been randomly selected to be today's Citizen in the labour dispute with the United Cable Car Collective.

John threw his head back and rolled his eyes. "Oh, no...Me? Why me? I don't even use the cable-cars! My apartment is just over there." He gestured to a nearby high-rise.

"I understand." said the Directorate with a sympathetic smile. "But as you know, it is for the greater good." And with that, the other woman who was in the room stepped forward, brandishing what looked to me to be something similar to an electric cattle-prod. Without hesitation, she jabbed it into the small of the man's back and clicked a switch.

"Ow! Hey!" John yelled. "Stop that!"

At this point, I must confess that I lost my composure somewhat, and momentarily forgot my role as consultant and impartial observer. "I am afraid I must insist to know what is going on!" I said more sharply than I should have to The Directorate. "What is the meaning of this barbarism?" He turned to me with surprise, and raised an eyebrow in genuine confusion.

"Barbarism?" he said. "I would hardly call it barbarism. What is it that you don't understand?"

I was stunned by his question. "I beg your pardon sir," I said, "but what I don't understand is why you just grabbed a random man off of the street and began to torture him!"

"This is a labour dispute," the Directorate said, looking at me curiously. "I thought I explained that."

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“Well it certainly doesn’t look like any labour dispute I’ve ever witnessed!” I said.

A glimmer of understanding fell upon the faces of both the Directorate and the Chief Steward at the same time. “Ah!” the Chief Steward said, nodding. “I think I understand. Canada must still do things the *old* way!”

“The old way?” I asked. The other man in the room stepped forward with his cattle prod and placed it on John’s chest. Click. When the screaming and cursing had subsided, the Chief Steward continued. “Oh yes,” she said, “Twelve years ago, we came upon a far more efficient and humane process for resolving our disputes..” She took the cattle prod from the man, and jabbed John in the neck with it. Click. His eyes rolled back and he let out a horrific scream.

The Directorate winced. “Why are you doing this to me?” John shouted at the Chief Steward. I’ve never done anything to you! I don’t even know you!”

The Chief Steward looked at me and shook her head. “They all ask the same question,” she said, then poked John again, this time in the legs. Click. The cry dissipated to a soft whimper.

“Let me see if I can explain,” The Directorate turned and said to me. “Although it may be somewhat difficult for you to comprehend, because your country clearly hasn’t evolved to our level yet.”

And it was at this point, good reader, that he outlined to me what must be the most ingenious revelation in labour relations since the advent of collective bargaining. It did indeed take me a while to grasp it, but the more he explained it, the more I began to understand the beauty and simplicity of their process.

“You see,” The Directorate continued, “Many years ago we were much like you. We would have impasses in our negotiations that were catastrophic to our little country. Workers would go on strike. Organizations would lock workers out. All in a bid to bring the other to their knees. It was a terrible thing.” He closed his eyes and bowed his head as if recalling some great atrocity. “Cable-cars stopped moving, paralyzing the country. Teachers stopped teaching, throwing our education system into chaos. Postal workers stopped delivering mail, crippling our business. Even once our doctors went on strike, virtually shutting down our hospitals.”

“It was bad for everybody. The workers had to bear our tremendously cold winters walking the picket lines. We,” he indicated the Chief Steward, “would find ourselves locked in rooms, shouting at each other for hours on end.”

The Chief Steward nodded gravely. “They were horrible, horrible times,” she agreed.

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“And every time these disputes happened,” The Directorate continued, “we would become angrier at each other. Dissent grew as neighbor became pitted against neighbor. Our populous would become bitter and frustrated – even after disputes had ended. It was a terribly inefficient and unproductive process in which everyone seemed to lose.”

He paused for a moment as the woman touched her prod to the inside back of John’s knee. Click. He waited for the screeching to die down, then continued. “It was madness – sheer madness. But twelve years ago The Directorate at the time had a wonderful revolutionary idea. I was fortunate enough to be in his employ, and got to watch it unfold. He called all of the Chief Stewards of all the collectives and unions together into one room, and together they came up with the *Single Citizen Retaliation Action Plan*, or SCRAP plan, as it is now known. It turned out to be a stroke of pure genius and moved collective bargaining light-years ahead of where it was.”

Pause. Click. Scream

“You see, now, rather than hurt thousands of people to settle a dispute, we only hurt one. So, in this case for example, the cable-cars keep moving, the operators keep getting paid, nobody is on a picket line, there are no harsh words, and only one person is inconvenienced.

Click. Scream “Inconvenienced?” John sobbed. “You call this *inconvenience*?”

At first I must admit to being aghast, as well. “But surely you don’t have the right to hurt an innocent citizen just to resolve your disputes!” I protested.

“Of course we do!” The Directorate affirmed. “Our rights are much the same as yours.”

“We most assuredly do *not* have the right to hurt innocent people,” I said emphatically. “We in Canada hold individual rights very strongly, and would never allow something such as this.”

“Really?” the Directorate said, with an amused look on his face. “I suspect that, not only do Canadians have the right to do harm to innocent people, but that this right is exercised quite frequently.”

I shook my head adamantly. Clearly he had Canada confused with another, less civilized country.

“Well, let’s examine this, shall we?” he said, taking on the air of a patient scholar. “If what I read is correct, one of your prestigious universities is currently shut down due to an impasse in labour negotiations, true?”

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“That is my understanding as well,” I admitted.

“And there are as many as fifty thousand students who’s education – their very future – is being jeopardized because of it. Is that accurate?”

I nodded. This was an unfortunate reality.

“So,” he said looking at me pointedly, “Are you suggesting to me that each of those 50,000 students have somehow done something to *deserve* their punishment?”

I blinked. “Well, no, of course not, but...”

“You also have a transit strike in the very capital of your country; is that not also true?” The Directorate continued.

“Well, yes, but...”

“And do you mean to tell me that the hundreds of thousands of citizens in that city – some who’s very lives may depend on such transportation – are simply getting some justice that was coming to them?”

“Heavens no, but...”

“I’m confused, then,” The Directorate pressed, “Why are these people who are doing so much harm not arrested and thrown in one of your jails?”

“Striking is one of our rights!” I cried out, “You can’t arrest someone for being on strike!”

The Directorate looked at me squarely and said, “So what you’re saying is that it is actually quite legal for someone in your country to hurt innocent people.”

I sputtered. This can’t be, I thought. But his words hit me like a cold wind. He was right, and I knew it. And the longer I thought about it, the more it sunk in. We *do* have the right to hurt innocent people!

Click. Scream.

He saw my glimmer of understanding, and continued. “So you see, our system is profoundly more humane than yours. Rather than hurting thousands upon thousands of innocent citizens as your country allows, we only hurt one.”

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“Of course we do feel bad for the Single Citizen who is chosen...” Click. Scream. “...but it is, after all, only one person. And we are able to keep him up here where the whole process won’t bother our general populous”

“So,” I continued, trying to make sure I understood, “you sit here jabbing an innocent citizen with electric prods until one of you gets tired of hearing the screams and gives in?”

“Precisely,” said The Directorate with obvious pride.

“So, how long does this take?” I asked.

“It can vary,” The Directorate said. “Initially, when this process began, it didn’t take very long at all. After all, being in a room with a screaming person can be quite unnerving when you’re not used to it. So at first, one of the sides would typically give in within a day or two.”

“But you do gain a certain tolerance to it after a while,” he continued, “so the process has begun to drag on longer. In this case,” he nodded again to the Chief Steward, “the issues are quite complex and contentious. We are in our twenty-third day of the dispute.”

The Chief Steward agreed, and added, “But we still try to make sure things are as civilized as possible. So, for example, in protracted disputes such as this, we choose a new citizen every couple of days or so – just so one person doesn’t have to be inconvenienced for too long.”

A sob came from the man slumped in the chair. “Again with the *inconvenience...*” he said, shaking his head.

Click. Scream.

“Some of the disputes do end faster than others.” The Directorate admitted, “For instance, just last week we had our elementary school teachers union turn down our contract offer, and vote for a SCRAP.”

He winced slightly. “An adult citizen like this,” he indicated John, “is old enough to understand what’s going on...”

“No I don’t! I really don’t...” John whimpered.

“...but a child of seven sitting in this chair.....” The Directorate’s voice tapered off, and his gaze shifted to the window. “We barely lasted five days.”

Click. Scream.

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As he spoke, I looked out the window at the people on the walkway, going to and from work, shopping, strolling. The cable-cars moved uninterruptedly back and forth on the spider web of cables in the sky. Up here, on the fifth floor, a dispute of national importance was being resolved, and the average citizen did not have their lives interrupted in any way.

It was, I realized, the perfect solution.

So, gentle reader, there you have it. I genuinely believe this is the solution we've been looking for. Simple, elegant, and efficient. No more forcing workers to picket in the bitterly cold Canadian winters. No more gridlock. No more elderly or young in jeopardy. No more going without wages. The mail would be delivered, buses would flow, children would learn, workers would work. All problems over. With only one – one of many millions – citizen being a SCRAPPER for the cause. Such a small price to pay for such a great benefit.

Best regards

Simon LaGuerre