

COMMENT

We know with absolute certainty it will not impact the Earth on Friday. And we can say there's ... maybe one chance in 300,000 it will impact (the Earth) in the next 100 years or so.

WESTERN UNIVERSITY SCIENTIST PETER BROWN ABOUT THE ASTEROID, ABOUT HALF THE SIZE OF A FOOTBALL FIELD, THAT WAS TO PASS WITHIN 27,600 KILOMETRES OF EARTH FRIDAY AFTERNOON.

When CSIS comes knocking in Hamilton

The message is 'We know what you're doing and we're watching you'

KEN STONE

I never dreamt that having an op-ed piece published in The Spectator would contribute to two CSIS agents knocking on my front door.

I have travelled quite a bit recently in the Mideast and have written and spoken on these visits extensively on TV. In October 2011, I visited Iran to attend a conference on Palestine. On January 11, 2012, The Spec published a piece by me entitled, "Harper is wrong in demonizing Iran: U.S. is a greater security threat than peaceful Mideast country."

The Canadian Security and Intelligence Service agents appeared at my door last month, on Jan 25. They said they knew I'd visited Iran and written about it in The Hamilton Spectator. They wanted to know about my relationship with Iran's government.

I told them my views on Iran were public, asked for their cards, politely declined to comment further, and closed the door. Later, I received a call from Zafar Bangash, imam of the York Region Islamic Society, inviting me to an event about Kashmir.

I told Imam Bangash about my CSIS visitors. He remarked: "CSIS agents visited me, too. They were on a fishing expedition, looking for informers. But, whatever explicit message they deliver, the underlying message is: 'We know what you're doing and we're watching you.' In other words, intimidation. I hope you didn't speak with them."

I assured the imam I'd followed the advice in a pamphlet, "If CSIS Comes Knocking," by the People's Commission Network, based in Montreal. Its preamble states, "Since the fall of 2009, there have been ongoing visits by members of CSIS to various local social justice organizers and activists. These visits are in addition to CSIS' ongoing harassment of targeted communities."

As advised, I called the Commission to report the visit. I noted from its website that it was dangerous to talk or even listen to CSIS because it played a nefarious and incompetent role in Canadian security matters. It referred specifically to security certificates CSIS prepared against five Arab and Muslim new Canadians, which documents have unjustly resulted in a decade of imprisonment and/or harassment for each. CSIS was also found complicit by a royal commission in the illegal rendition by the U.S. government of Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen, to Syria. Investigations of CSIS complicity in the illegal rendition of other Canadians are pending. Child soldier Omar Khadr was tortured in Guantanamo Bay partly on CSIS' instigation. CSIS even spied on postal union leaders during a 1991 strike.

After several scandals tarnished the RCMP's reputation in security and intelligence matters, CSIS was created in 1984, following the recommendations of the McDonald Commission. Its mandate is "to protect Canada's national security interests and the safety of Canadians."

Sid Lacombe, of the Canadian Peace Alliance, feels that CSIS abused that mandate. He related to me "numerous examples of people involved in peace and international solidarity movements being approached by CSIS or other intelligence services. We've reports of Canadian immigrants from Afghanistan, Egypt, Sri Lanka and of native-born peace activists who get unexpected visits from CSIS agents simply because they choose to organize demonstrations or to speak out against the actions of the Canadian government. This targeting puts a chill on organizing. Many have left the movement out of fear of potential government reprisals."

Another colleague, Ehab Lotayef of Gaza's Ark, a project to break the illegal Israeli blockade of Gaza, suffered two home visits by CSIS. "That type of visit is to intimidate us from going to Gaza," he said.

I urge others who may receive unwelcome CSIS visits to heed the advice of the People's Commission. Neither listen nor talk to CSIS. Register a complaint with your member of parliament. My MP, Chris Charlton, was kind enough to refer me to the New Democratic Party's public safety critic, MP Randall Garrison.

Although CSIS has no arrest powers, anything you say may be used against you or anyone you speak about. Instead, use your Charter rights of freedom of expression and association to influence the political direction of our country. If we are afraid to use our rights, we shall surely lose them.

Ken Stone is treasurer of the Hamilton Coalition To Stop The War and a steering committee member of the Canadian Peace Alliance.

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A humour columnist walks into a bar ...

All joking aside, I know I'm a community pillar. Or is that a cog?



PAUL BENEDETTI

There is a thing called a "fool's errand."

You may have heard of it. You may even have been on a few. A "fool's errand" is an impossible task — like trying to look cool in a corduroy vest, going to Home Depot and only buying what's on your list, or taking a cruise to lose weight.

The phrase came to mind because last week the Ontario Bar Association launched a public-relations campaign to change the image people have of lawyers — from, as one story put it, "greedy, overaggressive manipulators" to "pillars of the community" and an "indispensable cog in a healthy democracy."

Putting aside why anyone would want to be thought of as a "cog," I say, Hey, good luck with that!

I don't say that because there's anything particularly wrong with lawyers. In my experience, they're intelligent, articulate, decent people who seem to have unusually nice hair and clothes. I also say that because it's not the legal profession that has a bad reputation, it's every profession.

Sure, you can Google "lawyer jokes" and get a couple of million hits (some are pretty funny, too), but you can do the same for almost any profession and get the same number (or more) of jokes filling your screen. Think I'm kidding? Try "politician jokes" or "real estate agent jokes." Heck, type in "veterinarian jokes." You'd be amazed at how people can work a veterinary conference, a cow and two exotic dancers into one joke.

It has come to the point where you never hear the word "politician" without the word "sleazy," "businessman" without "unethical," and "senator" without "absent," "sleeping" and "expense-account-padding" or if you are just short-forming it — "Mike Duffy."

It's true that firefighters and nurses score really high on public surveys of trusted professions, but

Pharmacists do well, too, but then anyone handing out pills that make you feel good is usually pretty popular.

Will Barack Obama come to Africa?

A presidential visit would mean everything to people striving for peace and democracy

THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA It was YouTube and it was Barack Obama talking to the neighbours in Kenya. You may have heard that they're about to vote.

The last time the Kenyans did this, six years ago, 1,000 lay dead on the bloody streets. Another 600,000 were displaced, including here to Uganda where UN shelters near the airport are still up.

To all appearances, current prime minister Raila Odinga will now get the nod for the top post of president, and without the same violence. Certainly a peaceful election would be a relief for East Africa's 132 million people.

But this is Africa, where appearances can be deceiving. And so U.S. President Obama recently addressed Kenyans online — "to come together, instead of tearing apart" and "to show the world that you are not just a member of a tribe or ethnic group, but citizens of a great and proud nation."

It's an interesting gesture for various reasons. One is because, while Kenya is Obama's ancestral homeland, he hasn't paid so much attention to folks here. In fact, since taking office in 2008, Obama has spent less than 24 hours in sub-Saharan Africa — just a brief 2009 stopover in Ghana.

Both Bill Clinton, America's so-called "first black president," and George W. Bush, who gave \$15 billion in African AIDS relief in his first term alone, were far more Afrocentric. Obama's social policies on matters like gay marriage would also rile plenty of Africans.

But most — those who live hand-to-mouth without much education or exposure to the outside world — aren't aware of American presidential policy per se. They may acknowledge there has been a disconnect from this U.S. president who's a half-child of Africa, but they don't let it bother them.

Paul is a gardener I know. He puts it to me this way: "We were very happy along with him that a fellow black would rule America. (But) the help that we hoped for hasn't been realized."

In his next breath, he then credits Obama for single-handedly toppling Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi and wonders if the superpower president isn't planning that same shake-up for Uganda.

Educated Africans also give Obama slack for not visiting Africa. For one, he has had to guard against the deceptions of his opponents — "You're not even

there's an obvious reason for that. Pretty much the last thing you want during a blazing home inferno is an out-of-sorts firefighter who feels unappreciated. "No one gets on this ladder until you all apologize ... I'm waiting!"

Same goes with airline pilots who always score high ("We LOVE you. We REALLY do! Just land the plane OK?"). Pharmacists do well, too, but then anyone handing out pills that make you feel good is usually pretty popular.

No, the real issue is not any particular profession or person, it's everyone. Well, everyone ELSE.

For years, people have been delighted to tell me that journalists are illiterate, biased hacks who are shilling for: big business, big pharma, the Liberals, the Conservatives, or the NDP. And those are my relatives talking.

Let's run through a few other professions:

Teachers: Pampered, overpaid, lazy weasels with great pensions and summers off. This from people who can't manage their one teenager at home, never mind a class of 45 of them at 9 a.m.

Doctors: Pampered, overbilling, golf-playing complainers. It's all bad — until you need someone to lance a boil.

Bankers: Greedy, heartless fat cats, except on the day you want a mortgage, a loan, a line of credit ...

Stockbrokers: Same as above, with better suits.

University professors: Eggheads with cushy tenure jobs doing research nobody cares about and writing papers nobody reads. Oh, and, you know, teaching your kid.

Postal workers: Are you kidding?

Real estate salespeople: Slippery unethical opportunists other than your sister-in-law and YOU when you retire and write the realtor licence test.

Used-car salespeople: Slippery, lying, unethical opportunists except when you retire and become one part-time.

I'm always amazed that everyone is convinced they're the only people working really hard at a really important job — even when that job is inventory control specialist at a company that makes metal brackets for shelving units. They also seem sure that no one earns their pay, deserves a vacation or a decent pension — except them, of course. They're the best. Just ask them.

So, I wish lawyers luck. As for me, well I know I do a great job. I'm just deciding whether I want people to think of me as an "indispensable cog" or a "community pillar?"

Which one sounds taller?

Paul Benedetti lives in Hamilton. He is a former Spectator reporter and now teaches journalism at Western University.

SPEC BRIEFLY

Short and excerpted comments sent to letters@thespec.com

Indecipherable signs mean unfair ticket

I have sat in my vehicle on a number of occasions to assess what the multitude of varying literature on the numerous parking signs for a specific parking spot actually meant. After a lengthy review and deduction process, I determined that I would be within my legal right and that of the City of Hamilton to park, according to my assessment. Wrong again and another unjustified parking violation. It is unfair of the City of Hamilton to extract monies from the public when in fact the process they have put in place is not clear. Welcome to Hamilton. DOUG CORMIER, BRANTFORD

We need more nursing home beds

There have been a number of articles and letters concerning the blockage of beds in our hospitals. It seems to me that the elephant in the hospital room is a lack of nursing home beds. We can talk all we want about the need for increased home care but we are never going to be able to provide enough home care for those people who in fact need round-the-clock nursing care. Why is the need for more nursing home beds never mentioned? With the senior demographic growing rapidly, it should be obvious that the problem will only get bigger. But hospitals don't mention nursing home beds nor do LHINs or government. Can anybody tell me why when this seems like the most logical solution? MARY LOU REIMAN, HAMILTON

Question, don't swim with the tide

I am responding to the kerfuffle created by the ill-advised person who posted a diatribe against the gay community (in Africa) and, in so doing, besmirched the reputation of a Christ-affirming organization. I have on my fridge a quote from Mystical Paths by English author Susan Howatch on bucking the trend: "So did Christ. He didn't embrace the spirit of His age; He consistently questioned it; and when you live in an age like this one, and where all the old certainties are pouring down the drain; it's Christ you need to follow, not the latest Liberal who does nothing but swim with the tide." C.D. ROBERTS, HAMILTON

Is there anyone better to fan at least new hope in Africa than America's first black president?