

LETTERS

Letting Poilievre off the hook

It seems Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's strategy of refusing to speak to the mainstream news media is working. Exhibit A is the recent column by Andrew Phillips published in the Jan. 25 Spectator. Poilievre seized on a comment made by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a sit-down interview with Toronto Star columnist Susan Delacourt, taking to YouTube to falsely state Trudeau called Canadians "racist." Phillips failed to remind readers that Poilievre is refusing to speak to journalists such as Delacourt, who would otherwise surely be counted on to challenge him for saying a falsehood. Phillips in his column amplifies Poilievre's false statement, compliments him for his "expert" use of YouTube, then wags his finger at Trudeau for, if not calling people racist, for going up to the line and "insulting" them.

Poilievre is no doubt laughing. He has been rewarded for not speaking to journalists twice over, first by getting his falsehood-laden message out unfiltered and then by having it blow back on his opponent as criticism. Trudeau is meanwhile punished by Phillips for sitting down and talking to his own colleague. At a minimum, Poilievre needs to be called out by journalists such as Phillips each and every time he takes to social media rather than speak to journalists.

Greg Crone, Caledonia

It's a no-brainer

Will private clinics drain hospitals? (Jan. 25): How could they not? As Doug Ford himself would say — it's a no-brainer.

We know that private nursing agencies pay their nurses well above hospital rates to bring them on board, and then add surcharges to the hospital's bill for — you guessed it — profit. Sure — get private developers to build the clinics — but then, stop. It's not the separate facilities that are a problem — they're a great idea. It's the wasted public money.

The time is long past when the Ford government moved to overdrive with all the incentives needed to recruit and train the next generation of nurses.

Will it happen? Probably not. It's a no-brainer.

Carol Town, Hamilton

No peeing on my lawn

Do I pee and poop on your grass? No. So don't let your dog pee and poop on my grass. Do it on your own grass!

I don't own a dog or cat because I don't like the mess and damage it does to my grass and shoes. Because you like your animals, it seems to mean everyone has to like them. Plus, it's the law, your dog must be on a leash.

Dave Steeves, Hamilton

Hamilton airport woes

Hamiltonians are rightfully proud that our local airport is generally preferred over Toronto's Pearson. Ease of parking, quick access and a far less stressful travel experience are among the reasons frequently cited.

I therefore read with some initial delight a local news report citing the federal granting of \$23.5 million for improvements at John C. Munro airport. However, I was dismayed to learn that the grant will only be used to help build a new road and expand de-icing and airfield capacity to handle increased cargo operations. There was no reference to improvements benefiting passengers.

Two recent experiences highlighted the need to upgrade the "customer experience" at our airport. Departing for Cuba on Jan. 15, we were confronted with a crammed departure lounge with almost no spare seating. Given Hamilton is becoming a hub for a number of airlines, surely an expansion to serve flyers is warranted.

Another disappointing experience awaited our return, which was significantly delayed due to insufficient Hamilton airport staff, according to our pilot. That assertion was verified by the fact that, after quick processing at customs, passengers waited for more than 45 minutes for their luggage, despite the fact that ours was the only flight.

Clearly, something is not right when passengers are treated with far less respect than cargo.

Lorne Warwick, Dundas

Competition bureau blunder

The competition bureau has spent 5.5 years determining if any illegal activities took place when grocery corporations admitted they conspired to fix the price of bread. I wonder at the ability of the competition bureau when Loblaw's, via its \$25 voucher, admitted its wrongdoing. How can any organization spend 5.5 years looking to find a criminal act when those they are investigating have admitted their guilt?

It is the modern equivalent of Marie Antoinette's famous utterance, let them eat cake if bread is too expensive.

Bill Sullivan, Hamilton

Free-riders hurt everyone

A recent contributor writes that she helped keep her costs down on a recent trip to New York City by borrowing a friend's membership pass to the Met. This practice is why the Royal Botanical Gardens now requires photo ID along with your membership card when you visit. It is also a big problem for Netflix, driving up costs for everyone. This is the classic free-rider problem and is something to be discouraged, not promoted so glibly.

Mike Mollina, Hamilton



RYAN REMORZ / THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE PHOTO

Jason Allen discusses the strengths, and weaknesses, of Via Rail and train travel in Canada in general.

Via should be a travel gem in Canada. Why isn't it?

JASON ALLEN

Recently I booked my trip of a lifetime on a national air carrier from Hamilton to Whitehorse in the Yukon. It was a moment of excitement and anticipation tempered with not just a bit of anxiety.

You see, I watch a lot of news, and if the news over the holidays has been any indication, there is a pretty good chance that my flight from here to there could go badly enough that it may ruin the whole experience.

For the past three weeks we've been inundated with stories of people being stranded, people searching desperately for their possessions in an endless sea of unclaimed luggage, and computer failures grounding hundreds of flights, even entire airlines.

Air travel is a mess. And likely will be for some time to come.

The problem is, that in North America, (compared to Europe or the Far East), we don't really have a good alternative for long-distance travel. It's frustrating, delay-prone, flight, or a long, somewhat uncomfortable drive.

Why not take the train? Why not indeed.

Canada has arguably the worst long-distance rail service of any G8 country. Since Via's privatization in 1977, virtually every government

that has followed has cut service or funding. And the one or two that didn't, bungled the job.

Via has, by any mass transportation standard, appallingly low ridership outside of the Windsor to Quebec City corridor, and there are some very simple reasons why.

Via travel is exceptionally comfortable. The food is better than most airline food, and if you travel business class (at a fraction of the cost of a flight the same distance) the alcohol, for those who enjoy it, is good and plentiful.

Customer service in my experience has been top notch, the washrooms are clean and seating room is generous.

So where is the problem? Delays. Via trains are rarely if ever on time, and the longer the trip, the greater the delay. This can get to the point where the Canadian often rolls into Vancouver from its week-long voyage from Toronto a full day late.

The cause of the delays is simple. In Canada, Via is a product of CN, which spun the division off as the car became king and ridership dropped. In that process, however, rules were established that freight trains take precedence for track space over passenger trains. To make matters worse, many tracks through remote locations in Canada are single tracks. Double or triple tracks within the same right of way

are basically unheard of outside of major centres.

The result of this is that when a Via and a CN train are competing for the same track, the Via train needs to pull into a siding to wait for the freight train to pass. Sometimes this involves the Via pulling off well before the freight train arrives, because sidings are few and far between. I've even been on trains that had to back up to go to the nearest siding to get out of the way of an oncoming freight train.

This is a rule that the federal government could remove with the stroke of a pen, and in so doing create the circumstances for a vibrant, well used long distance rail industry in Canada. Sure, it would require some further investment from CN and CP, and they and their investors would no doubt have some things to say about that, but if Canada wants to move people long distances without airplanes or roads, it's basically our only option.

As our planet warms and air travel is more and more of a chaotic and environmentally destructive option, it's time for the federal government to view long-distance rail as a practical, environmentally friendly and comfortable way of moving a large number of people around our country. Along with their luggage.

JASON ALLEN LIVES IN HAMILTON.

The quest for balance is a worthy search we all share



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

MUKONO, UGANDA My eldest, a busy university student, mentioned balance before I flew away. "For balance," she said to me, after I'd asked how I could pray for her in my absence.

It's a good request, like asking for a compass. Modern western life isn't known for its tremendous balance.

"We're distracted from distraction by distraction." That's how poet TS Eliot put it. That was 90 years ago, when phones were used to, you know, talk to people.

Now can you put "balance" in the name of some running shoe, or lace up a pair and go. But you'll have a better shot at finding your balance without shoes at all. Take off your shoes, so to speak, and then you can listen to your life, what it might be trying to say to you.

Not someone else's life. Your life. The one with your own experiences and desires. Your own heartbeat and mind. Your own responsibilities. And insecurities. And fears. The life that's gifted and entrusted to you. The one that, when you meet your maker, is the only life you'll be asked about.

I actually get around in bare feet whenever possible. If the neighbours see me, even in winter, outside briefly with the garbage, or the

dog, they laugh. "Thom, are you in Africa?"

I mean, a little snow between the toes never hurt anybody.

But now I'm in Africa, in Uganda, where it's easier to appreciate these things, especially in mornings from my university guest house. From here I watch the sunrise before taking a few steps — about 200, but who's counting? — to where I'll sit and eat breakfast while the birds and monkeys and many things unseen go about their own business.

The university, among thousands of developing nation schools in post-pandemic recovery, sits on 36 hectares (90 acres) of rolling, green hills. You know the stereotype of Africa's danger? This is something different. For a dozen years this campus was home, our kids and their friends running around in their own bare feet.

Now it seems even more holy when the sun, that great mass of burning hydrogen and helium, that glorious morning star 150 million kilometres away, rises, somehow so near, to establish its authority for the day.

The sun, of course, doesn't worry about much. It just shines. Yesterday. Today. Presumably tomorrow. It's never late, no matter how dark, or crazy, the previous night. It's secure in its identity. It knows what it is, perfectly balanced and energized. The sun shines, uninterested in doing more. Or less. It doesn't multi-task. It's not distracted. Not lost. It's content.

Contrast this with the anxious busyness of our time, as if doing more and more earns you some badge of honour. As if we're human doings, not human beings. Not that things don't need doing. They do. But lose your balance and find what the Germans call "zerissenheit," or "torn-to-pieces-hood." As it's been said, "You can go against the grain of the universe, but don't be surprised when you get splinters."

So do less and enjoy it more. Nourish your soul. Get outside. Walk in the woods. Pick up a worthwhile compass-like book like, say, Frederick Buechner's "Listening to Your Life." Do a social media fast. Exercise. Make art. Create space. Even a humble musical note knows that it needs space before and after itself to have meaning. This is what day-break here says to me.

A Ugandan journalist friend, a university department head who was once my student, was talking about it with me, the crisis of meaning that's growing in western nations, along with mental-health issues like anxiety. "It's coming here, too," he said, even here, where more people's heads are where? In their so-called smartphones.

God help us. No, really. Help us find our way. Help us with our balance. Help us shine. It's a reasonable prayer for a late January day, before we're completely out the gate of another year.

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