

THE PEP

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FOREWORD

We are pleased to be putting out this second issue of the *PEP Gazette*. It seems that every month there are more and more things happening in the world that make clear the importance of understanding the processes that go into how we make decisions as groups. At every scale, from the personal, to the national, to the international, there is always something new that needs to be understood and acted upon. We continue to hope that this small publication can provide an outlet for MSVU students and alumni to critically engage with those processes and to be a space to explore matters of politics, economics, and philosophy that we might not otherwise have the opportunity to do in the course of our curricular studies.

As always, we look forward to hearing what you have to say,

Scott Ripley, President of the MSVU PEPS



IS 'CANADIAN' POSSIBLE... UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES?

Scott Ripley

Earlier this month was Canada Day, and for several years now there has been discussion in the mainstream media about whether it is appropriate or not to celebrate Canada in light of the discovery of several thousand unmarked gravesites on residential school grounds. I want to take this beyond the #CancelCanadaDay discourse and entertain a broader question: is there even a "Canadian" identity to celebrate?

I wouldn't be a political science major if I didn't start off with a POLS 1001 level tangent on the definitions of nations and states. A state, broadly, is a defined territory with a defined population subject to a sovereign government that holds the monopoly on violence. Nations, a more nebulous concept, are communities of people bound together by common cultural, linguistic, and historical commonalities. Canada is a state (albeit with considerable illegitimacy in the territory part of the equation) but it is not a nation.

What then are we meant to be celebrating on Canada Day? There seem to be two possibilities, both are troubling. Either we are being asked to celebrate the Canadian state and its component

institutions or we are being asked to celebrate a Canadian national identity that cannot represent all the people in this country.

If it's the former, we are placed in an awkward position. Proponents of patriotic celebration would point to the usual talking points of universal healthcare, peacekeeping, and a commitment to multiculturalism as examples of what to celebrate the Canadian state for. However, this willingly ignores the state's actions of genocide against Indigenous peoples and long-standing discrimination against racialized minorities. There are those who argue that to not celebrate would be to erase history; but what would be a more blatant disregard for the country's past than to forget atrocities whenever it was convenient to do so?

If it is the latter, which I suspect it is, we have to grapple with the implications of that. We have to ask who gets to define what the "Canadian identity" is. Those of us who grew up here no doubt developed their understanding of what Canadian meant largely through TV; Heritage Minutes, politicians talking on the news, or anything on the CBC. The state itself has significant influence over the media we consume and are therefore in a position to shape what we think it means to be Canadian. It is telling that the bulk of what Canadians are told to be proud of are things done by the state. Is the Canadian identity then meant to be defined by the fact that we are all subject to the same government?

I cannot answer these questions, not just for lack of time or words but because the concepts involve are so broadly contested in meaning and highly interconnected and complex. I am in no position to tell someone whether they can or cannot, should or should not, celebrate on Canada Day, but I can ask that whatever you do you try to critically engage with the questions involved in that decision. For me, Canada Day has become a date to philosophically reflect on the ideas of nationalism, patriotism, and identity and to encourage others to do so too.



WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY WEEK IN POLITICS

Natalie Locke

In May 2022, I travelled to Ottawa after writing an essay titled “Commitment Issues: The Liberal Government and Their Empty Gestures for Reconciliation.” The Charles Bronfman and Marial Mosher Award at MSVU presents Political and Canadian Studies students the opportunity to explore the capital city, shadow an MP, a senator, and tour the Senate. The award grants financial aid towards next semester’s tuition and money to cover travel expenses.

I shadowed MP Lena Diab and Senator Kim Pate with a calm eagerness. I felt I knew many of the issues facing Canadians (thanks to my studies) and focused on observing how Parliament and the Senate *actually* functioned.

I discovered staffers are an extension of the members they serve. They are researchers, collaborating with members on reports, attending most meetings, and debates. They are communicators, posting on social media, arranging schedules, and replying to emails. They are a support system. Not only dedicated towards the greater good but ensuring members make time to

go to the dentist. Political staffers are typically in the shadows, emerging largely due to scandal and rarely in recognition. Many staffers are under the age of 30, attending university, or fulfilling an internship. Young adults are essential to the everyday functioning of Canadian politics.

I witnessed members of Parliament who strived to do the best for their constituents and country. Their goals are often hindered by the party system, its rules, and procedures. Prior to travel, I read Jody Wilson-Raybould's *"Indian" in the Cabinet*. She believes one of the greatest problems within our parliamentary system is the politics within political parties. I believe she is right. Yet, without it, members would be virtually faceless.

I learned so much more throughout my trip, but these two observations altered my perception of Canadian politics forever. I am grateful for the experience.

WARREN BUFFETT AND THE GIVING PLEDGE: PRAISE-WORTHY OR PROPAGANDA?

Michael Gillis

Derived from [News Media Films](#).

The Giving Pledge

Multi-billionaire Warren Buffett launched “The Giving Pledge” in 2010 when he, Bill Gates, Melinda French Gates, and a host of other billionaires vowed to donate “a majority” of their wealth to philanthropic foundations — either little by little, or upon or before their deaths.

The Giving Pledge became a movement — and a kind of club — for the world’s billionaires to effectively rid themselves of at least half of their multi-billions of dollars. The Giving Pledge’s website acts as a sort of database to keep track of who has taken the pledge, displaying their names, pictures, and “pledge letters,” which every pledger is encouraged to write in reflection of the cause.

The Pledge, as the website’s FAQ describes, not only aims to hold the 0.01% of society accountable for the redistribution of their wealth — often in the form of selling shares — to the rest of society, but also to strengthen “the social norm that the wealthiest people are expected to give the majority of their wealth to philanthropy and charitable causes.” In other words, the goal of the Pledge is to structurally encourage billionaires to redistribute their wealth through their own collective effort.

How Effective has the Pledge Been?

In terms of the amount of billionaires who have chosen to take the oath, the number of pledgers is astounding. Beginning at first with 40 signatories from the United States in 2010, there are now 236 pledges from billionaires across 28 countries — which can either be comforting or disconcerting, depending on how you feel about the number of billionaires on the earth.

However, other goals of the pledge show mixed results. While the philanthropists should, in theory, have pledged over \$500 billion based on their collective net worths, the actual amount of money being given is much less.

Elon Musk — who took the pledge in 2012 — is an example of a pledger who hasn't exactly fulfilled expectations. Musk has strangely refused to make his pledge letter public on The Giving Pledge website. He has also donated only about 0.05% of his net worth to charity (some of which went to his own nonprofit organization), claiming in 2018 he would donate more “in about 20 years when Tesla is (in a) steady state.”

This all begs the question, with climate change tipping points and global inequality looming large in our future and present, can the super-rich really be the steadfast benefactors of our society, whether through the Giving Pledge or some other charitable means?

Can we — and should we — rely on a real-life Tony Stark, like Elon Musk or Bill Gates, to save our world from problems that could be solved, or at least lessened, by billions of well-placed dollars?

Warren Buffett: The Good and the Ugly

Let's take a look at Warren Buffett, the 9th richest person on earth according to Forbes' list of billionaires, and one of the co-founders of the Giving Pledge.

Buffett is praised as one of the most successful investors and self-made multi-billionaires of all time, moving from investment salesman and securities analyst in the 1950s to chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway Inc. by 1970. By 1990, he was the owner of one billion dollars.

Buffett isn't exactly the Scrooge-like figure you might think of when picturing a multi-billionaire. Many claim that the Oracle of Omaha's climb up the billionaire ladder through investment is more honest and ethical than someone who has profited off the backs of wage laborers, like Jeff Bezos (who, incidentally, hasn't taken the Giving Pledge).

Buffett also routinely advocates for increased taxes on the ultra-rich, even using his own income tax as an example of the massive wealth inequality in society. He's teamed up with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton multiple times for Democrat-based political campaigns and has generally cultivated an image of being one of the only billionaires who seems intent on losing the title.

Having nearly honored his commitment to the Giving Pledge and being well on his way to fulfilling his 2006 vow that he will donate 99% of his wealth by the end of his life, as of June 2022 he's donated about \$45.5 billion to charity, which represents nearly half of the \$97.7 billion that Forbes values him at today.

In short, there are no doubts that Warren Buffett is the king of philanthropy. But he still has a few critics.

The most obvious point of contention is the fact that Buffett, as the owner of the Berkshire Hathaway mega-conglomerate, is either the head boss, or has at least a significant stake in the well-being, of millions of employees from companies such as GEICO, Duracell, Dairy Queen, and Fruit of the Loom — all of which Berkshire Hathaway wholly owns.

Much like Bezos, Buffett directly profits off the arduous labor of this underpaid and precarious working class. And even if Buffett advocates for higher taxes on the ultra-rich and allegedly chooses not to use common billionaire tax-loopholes, ProPublica gained access to IRS documents that show he still has the lowest real tax rate among the super-rich, paying “less than 10 cents for every \$100 he added to his wealth” between 2014 and 2018.

Others point to the atrocious working conditions that employees under his companies suffer. For example, Berkshire Hathaway owns about 9.32% of Coca-Cola, which has a history of denying unionization, decent wages, and health plan benefits to its employees.

Recently, Buffett even butted heads with Bernie Sanders after refusing to settle a strike at the Special Metals plant in Huntington, West Virginia (which is owned by Berkshire Hathaway) after the plant attempted to raise the cost of health coverage for its workers from \$275 to \$1000 each month.

The Cost of Philanthropy

So, which is it?

Are Warren Buffett and his philanthropist friends a shining beacon of hope for the planet as we navigate massive inequalities, poverty, and a climate emergency, or is the Giving Pledge just

another non-binding marketing stunt from a past era when ordinary people thought (and hoped) the ultra-rich had our best interests in mind?

Does giving billions back to society make you a hero, even when those billions are generated by a system that profits off the grueling, under-compensated labor of everyday taxpayers?

It's a complex issue, and one with numerous more points to explore — more than we can cover in one article. For example:

Many billionaires place their money in Donor-advised funds (DAFs), which give them an immediate tax break as if they were giving to charity. However, billionaires can — and do — simply leave their money in, or pull it out of, DAFs at any time without donating anything at all.

Surprisingly, taxpayers are also the ones that have to cover the huge amounts of foregone revenue billionaires leave when giving to charity and receiving these kinds of massive tax cuts. In other words, taxpayers subsidize billionaires' philanthropy — in some cases, even up to 74 cents for every dollar they donate. In light of this, is philanthropy really as “private” an undertaking as we think it is?

And finally, is it fair that taxpayers subsidize philanthropists' so-called charitable giving when billionaires are unelected and the wider society has no voice in deciding where their donations go? Should we instead trust an elected government to invest our taxes back into society rather than support philanthropy? How do we democratize the process?

Link to Michael's other articles: <https://newsmediafilms.com/author/michaelgeoidentity-com/>.

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