

B.C. for \$ale Conference Media Reports

Meltdown may not be all bad:

Wall Street woes focus attention on inequality of wealth in society

Brad Bird, Oceanside Star

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Wall Street's recent meltdown has an upside, Linda McQuaig says.

Its collapse is focusing attention on the "enormous salaries" found in big business and big banks and is an opening point for something seldom discussed -- the growing inequality of material wealth in North American society.

McQuaig, an author of seven books including *It's the Crude, Dude*, has made a career of challenging the establishment. She was the keynote speaker Saturday at BC for \$ale, a conference in Parksville held by the Oceanside Coalition for Strong Communities.

She noted how the public bailout is considered outrageous by many, who point to the multi-million-dollar salaries received by executives in the financial industry.

"What it really means is socialism for the rich and capitalism for the rest of us," she said in the Chrysler Theatre to loud applause, playing on the idea that neo-conservatives like George Bush normally knock government intervention and assistance, but not this time.

Markets worldwide are in a downturn which some are comparing the Great Depression of the 1930s. Billions of dollars in paper wealth have been lost as the prices of equities plummet, and local retirees are among those hit as cash flow from dividends declines.

The audience Saturday consisted mostly of older people, most of whom agreed with McQuaig, judging by the applause.

Virtually all economic gains since 1980 have gone to the richest 10 per cent of society, particularly the top one per cent, while the people at the bottom have lost ground, she said.

"What we're looking at here is a massive wealth grab by the richest members of society, and I would argue that the public largely doesn't know this," said McQuaig, who Conrad Black once said should be horsewhipped.

The good news about the Black saga is that "it shows that even a rich right-wing crook can go to jail," she said, calling him "the perfect symbol of excessive greed."

She blamed the "corporate-owned media, of which you have a nasty dose here in B.C.," for focusing public anger not on big business but on big government.

"The key tactic of the right wing is to destroy our faith in government, to convince us that government can't do things," McQuaig said. "Above all they want to destroy the idea that collective solutions work."

In fact they do work -- in spades, she said, pointing to the Scandinavian countries which are among the most competitive in the world, based on governments which tax and regulate highly, providing free university tuition, seven annual weeks of vacation for all workers, and public health care.

Sweden and Norway regulate society for the collective good, she said, resulting in successful economies which belie the conventional wisdom of neo-cons like Stephen Harper, who seek to reduce government involvement.

The idea of intergenerational transfer is that students who train for almost free will go on to good jobs, providing taxes to support those in their later years who helped them through school. Societies of people helping each other are able to do more than individuals out for themselves, she added.

One questioner, Dallas Collis, who is running for mayor, asked McQuaig, "How do we wake up locally?"

She agreed that society is "in a state of unconsciousness" about what is going on. "We get caught up in this mindless world of superficiality and consumption ... that we should aspire to material rewards," blaming in part the mesmerizing effects of TV.

Then, realizing how this conflicts with her basic premise that wealth is good but needs to be shared more fairly, she added that material wealth isn't all bad, it just needs to be spread around more. The point of view that personal industry, ability and merit deserve to be rewarded was not presented during her hour-long speech.

She pointed to greed, noting how baseball star Hank Aaron earned \$200,000 annually during the 1970s, top pay in the game at the time, while today the top earner, Alex Rodriguez, receives \$27 million a year.

Material reward isn't necessary to produce great works, she concluded, pointing to William Shakespeare, "who had no movie contract" yet produced some of the world's most enduring plays.

She praised former Liberal Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson as the type of man you would welcome into your home, a proven diplomat and politician. Stephen Harper she dismissed as "an alien life form," a slight which followed her description of him as a neo-conservative disciple of Milton Friedman, who opposed government regulation.

Mayor Sandy Herle opened the conference with a welcoming address, noting to applause that Parksville council had taken the formal stand of not privatizing our water. Others in the crowd included federal NDP candidate Zeni Maartman, candidate Barbara

Biley of the Marxist-Leninist Party, Coun. Barry Avis of Qualicum Beach and NDP MLA Scott Fraser. Rick Sullivan of the OCSC planning committee introduced the session.

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Big government is not all bad - Linda McQuaig

Parksville Qualicum Beach News

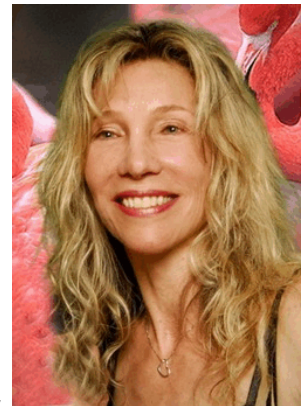
By Fred Davies

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A room full of people applauding the suggestion of tax hikes might seem an improbable sight.

It's precisely what happened though during a morning keynote address at B.C. for Sale — a conference on privatization and its reputed ills held over the weekend at Parksville Community and Conference Centre.

The well-attended, free symposium featured a who's who of the country's left wing prognosticators, including MLA for Nelson-Creston, Corky Evans, former Socred cabinet minister and popular radio personality Rafe Mair and journalist and best selling author Linda McQuaig.



Presented by the Oceanside Coalition for Strong Communities, with financial support from a number of unions, the conference questioned governments' promotion of private sector involvement in areas like health care, transportation and hydro as more efficient and less costly.

"People look at government and say the way it has been behaving is certainly bad so why should we care?" said McQuaig during her Saturday morning presentation. "By disempowering government we allow private interests to develop and the ultimate result is the rich simply get richer."

McQuaig said the flameout experienced recently on Wall Street, and the accompanying efforts at a bail out package, reveal the hypocrisy of a political and economic system that rewards the very rich at the expense of the rest.

"When Wall Street collapsed, suddenly they discovered the value of a community approach. The bail out amounts to socialism for the rich and capitalism for the rest of us," she said.

Many in attendance said a spirited discussion among Mair, Evans, and members of the audience was a highlight of the day. Mair summed up his feelings on privatization of formally public resources thus: "It's a way to turn all of these things over to the greedy buggers who will no longer do what they're told."

Also included in the conference was a talk by political activist and publisher Mel Hurtig, as well as workshops spearheaded by The Columbia Institute and B.C. Health Coalition.

Saturday's lineup was followed on Sunday with a planning session aimed at identifying specific action that can be taken against the increasing prevalence of the private sector in public spheres.

Rick Sullivan, a member of the OCSC, said public uproar over privatization has been muted because of a mythology propagated by big business interests at the public's expense.

"That mythology is that the private sector can do a better job," he said. "Any jurisdiction that has tried this has failed. New Zealand is in the process of trying to buy its railway back.

"The whole issue of tainted food; that's come about, in my opinion, by tuning over the safety of the henhouse to the fox. Letting the power brokers be self-supervising, that's what led to the scandal."

McQuaig, in her talk, said a vision — established around the time of the Second World War to foster the good of the larger community — has been largely squandered.

"The Keynesian Revolution was about a stronger role for government in protecting the public good. Today that's hard to imagine."

Though comprehensive in scope, her talk, entitled *The Real Axis of Evil: Business Money and Politics*, was not without moments of humour.

After noting a regular insert of the *National Post*, *The Wealthy Boomer*, appears in the main to contain articles about tax rage and ads for Viagra she quipped: "Does that rage cause erectile dysfunction? Or maybe erectile dysfunction is the cause of tax rage. The good news is the right [wing] is impotent."