

Getting better?



By Nate Smelle

Feeling energized by the good vibrations of the drums and the sage smoke smudging provided to me by an elder of the Lubicon Cree First Nation after a long day of marching through the streets of Quebec City, I began my walk back to the hotel to enjoy my first meal in a couple of days. Although I was there to add my voice to the collective my lack of nourishment was not a conscious act of self-sacrifice or fasting to lessen my impact on the environment. Full on the experience I had been indulging in since boarding the bus to the rally I had simply forgotten to eat.

Strolling along Boulevard René-Lévesque light-headed from my hunger, I experienced a feeling of déjà vu. I began to reflect on the last time I had walked down this boulevard 14 years ago. Yes the landscape looked very much the same, the streets were full of activists demanding change and the weather was a carbon copy of that sunny day so long ago the two experiences left me with two very unique impressions of the city.

As I continued to stroll down the boulevard my thoughts drifted back to my conversations earlier that day with Grand Chief Serge ?Otsi? Simon of the Mohawk Council of Kanesatake and Hastings Highlands activists Deb Jeffries and Jim and Marjory McPherson. Each of these activists explained to me that the motivating principle bringing them to Quebec City was the welfare of future generations. Recognizing that the climate-sensitive energy strategy being discussed by Canadian premiers was born a lack of action on the federal level, it seems as if the provinces and territories are beginning to see things under a similar light. If Canada is to meet its greenhouse gas emissions targets the federal government will also need to play a major role in protecting the climate. For this to happen, the federal government will also need to honour the value of future generations.

Calmly walking away from the gigantic gathering I absorbed the architecture and the street art complementing the urban design around me as I compared my two experiences in Quebec City. My mind flashed back to that day in 2001. At the time I had made the journey north to Quebec City to film and participate in the Summit of the Americas demonstration (aka the Plummet of the Americas). The climate marchers this past weekend were essentially calling for the same things as the protesters in 2001? a clean environment and a socially just economic system? but still these two experiences couldn't have been more different.

The marchers on both occasions in Quebec City even chanted many of the same slogans, shouting out things like, ?This is what democracy looks like!? and ?Sol-Sol-Sol-Solidarity!?. While the sense of solidarity among the demonstrators may have been similar, my memories of what democracy looked like in 2001 differed greatly from how it looked on Saturday.

In 2001 democracy in Quebec City resembled a cloud of tear gas rising from a canister carefully fired into a crowd of activists seated in the middle of Boulevard René-Lévesque. In 2015 the gas was replaced by the sweet scent of sage gently wafted throughout the crowd by a handful of pheasant feathers. In 2001 there was a massive chain link fence erected between the demonstrators and the elected officials pushing for an unregulated global free market economy. In 2015 the demonstration was allowed to penetrate deep into the historic heart of Quebec City. I remember the fiery pressure of a tear gas canister hitting me in the chest as I filmed the goings on around me back in 2001. This time around it was the wrath of a concrete bench that I walked into as I focused my camera on a 10-foot tall paper maché puppet of a premier.

Are things getting better?

I'd like to think so.

Unfortunately many of the same threats to our social and ecological welfare still exist, and in some cases like climate change have gotten worse due to a lack of political will on all levels of government.