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Confessions of a 2 percenter

By **JACK QUARTER**

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I am looking at the Occupy Wall Street and copycat demonstrations and feeling some guilt. The target is the top 1 per cent, but any university professor with 25 to 30 years of service is not far off the mark, and if you have nearly 40 years of service, a standard for which I qualify, even though my starting pay was less than \$11,000, you have to believe that you may be uncomfortably close to the charmed circle; perhaps not the very rich, but way up there.

“What is to be done?” to quote the title of an oft-cited pamphlet of a long-departed revolutionary. The answer isn’t easy, though I did recognize the backside of one of my colleagues in a *Toronto Star* photo of the Occupy Toronto events, and the thought occurred to me that my backside should be there as well.



Barrie Maguire Newsart illustration Oct. 20 2011 (BARRIE MAGUIRE / NEWSART)

For some people, being well paid isn't troubling. The Wall Street crowd and the Bay Street facsimile are easy targets, but are they different than the rest of us? Well, they are in one respect: unsightly bonuses are common practice, even though they came close to wrecking the U.S. economy in 2008, and arguably could be viewed as catalysts for the financial mess that has encircled parts of the globe. Generally, that crowd is down on

government, except when they require a bailout.

I am not down on government, and am concerned about its withering presence. In my lifetime, taxes on the wealthiest of Canadians have been cut by nearly half, and of course, I have benefited too, though I am probably only a 2 percenter, just outside the charmed circle. I would be pleased to pay more taxes, but repeating that too often could get you classified as weird, and possibly worse.

I grew up in a world where there was lots of opportunity. People could become teachers in Ontario without even completing high school, Grade 13 at that time. To become an accountant, it wasn't necessary to go to university. Today, prospective teachers need an Honours BA, high marks, extensive volunteer experience, a Bachelor of Education degree, and if they are willing to go to James Bay, they might get hired by a school board. The sociologist, Ivar Berg, referred to the inflation of education credentials for less payoff in the job market as "the great training robbery." His labelling written 40 years ago has proved prophetic.

I repeat myself: "What is to be done?" For Lenin, whom I quote, it was easy. However, the U.S. and Canada today are not the U.S.S.R. at the end of World War I, and, excepting what diehards may think, the scale-the-ramparts mentality, while romantic, has not led to compelling results. I hope that Occupy Wall Street and facsimiles do not go that route.

That said, I feel that the Occupy Wall Street movement and its facsimiles could be worthwhile, as they are creating awareness of a serious social problem. In the U.S., where they began (some would say they began in the Middle East last spring), they are creating awareness of the extraordinary inequalities. (One per cent earns 25 per cent of the income and even a greater share of the wealth, and has succeeded in ratcheting down their tax rates to the lowest among the wealthiest countries.)

The gap between rich and poor is less extreme in Canada, but still is troubling, as a growing number of studies have indicated. Ten years of Harperism might draw us into a dead heat with the U.S., as the vision is more of the same: to lower taxes, which benefits mainly the wealthy, and to reduce public spending on social programs, which hurts mainly people with lower incomes. For those who get out of line, there will be a major investment in nice modern prisons.

The Occupy Wall Street movement is located where it ought to be: the epicentre of the inequality mill. The problem is the system of those institutions and how they are allowed to function, not so much the individuals who populate them. Wealthy individuals can be generous, à la Andrew Carnegie, whose [Gospel of Wealth](#) essay, written in 1899, reminded them that they were obliged to give it away (not part of it, but everything) before they die, and indeed would be cursed if they didn't.

Carnegie was the extreme case, you might say, another weirdo, and he did get his name on libraries, universities and peace initiatives throughout the world and encouraged a trend — cynically viewed as monument building with a public benefit. Fair enough, but we need some organizations of the wealthy that lobby to restore fairer tax rates, not simply Warren Buffett solo: “Billionaires of the world, unite! For fairer tax rates!” could be the rallying cry. Governments in wealthy countries, arguably plutocracies (although they claim otherwise), seem to listen to the rich much more so than anyone else.

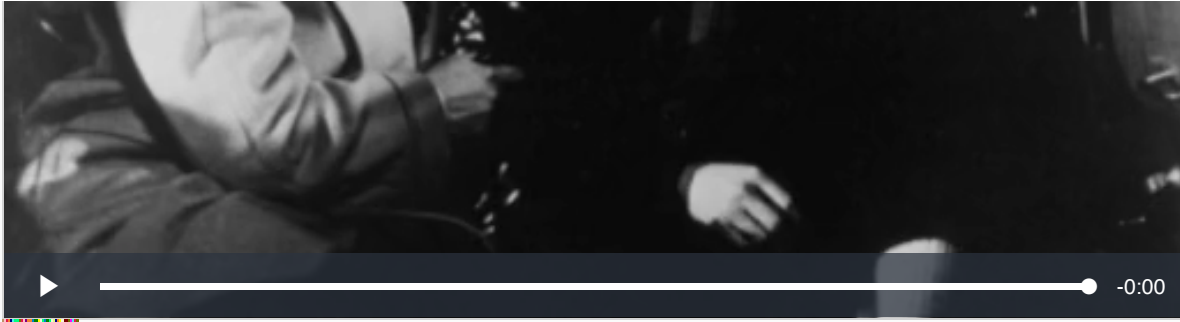
Will the Occupy Wall Street movement and facsimiles change this pattern and push governments to engage in policies that seek to reduce inequalities, not worsen them? It is unclear, but life is like that.

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