

February 15

## Is this the Era of Bully Philanthropy?



Recently, philanthropist Paul Bronfman announced he was suspending his support for York University due the presence of a painting hanging in the students' centre depicting a Palestinian concealing a rock (and presumably getting ready to throw it) at an Israeli bulldozer

demolishing Palestinian homes. Bronfman derided the piece as symbolic of what he sees as York's culture of anti-semitism. The aesthetic merits of the painting notwithstanding, it's a head-scratcher what exactly is controversial in this depiction: In case the reader of this blog has been asleep for a century and just woke up, Israeli bulldozers DO demolish Palistinian homes and young Palestinian protesters DO through rocks. Yet, Bronfman has read into it something so nefarious, so repugnant, that he has publicly repudiated the University and forsworn any future donation.

A milder, more playful version of this took place some weeks back, when the living embodiment of philanthro-coolness, Brett Wilson, channeled his inner Dragon and issued a public threat to the City of Calgary: Allow Uber to operate in Calgary, or say goodbye to my \$100,000 donation to the new public library. While I happen to agree with Wilson that Uber should be permitted to operate in Calgary, a city notoriously underserved by the its current taxi oligopoly, it doesn't follow that punishing the Calgary Public Library is anything other than a spasm of fire-breathing misanthropic mischief. Nevermind the curious irony of withholding support for one type of sharing economy activity in favour of another.

The most troubling aspect of these examples, however, is the signal this sends other Canadian citizens: That there is a heirarchy of opinion, the veracity of which should match the size of your pocketbook. We have seen over the past few decades how philanthropy has moved from passively beneficent and humbly detached to active and strategic, with mixed results. For the arts in particular,

and the imperative of free expression, let us be thankful there are still donors practicing the former tradition. Mr. Bronfman is normally a stalwart supporter of the arts, but on the York University issue, he's veered into disturbing territory.

The latter philanthropic tradition - what we often now celebrate as "strategic philanthropy" has two faces: On the one hand, we see genuine philanthropic innovators - donors who are curious, open and willing to take risks and work collaboratively with others. This brand can be traced back to Andrew Carnegie, whose strategic scaling and dissemination of the public library model - one of the iconic examples of how philanthropy can seed society-wide positive social transformation - was notably issued as a challenge and an opportunity for municipalities. Not as a threat. The shadow side of "strategic philanthropy" is one in which the donor or their foundation falls in love with their "theory of change" (with whatever ideological baggage might come along for the ride) to the exclusion of other ways of viewing the world and changing it for the better.

It is one thing to conceive of oneself as an Uber-citizen (an irresistible pun, apologies), but a line is crossed when the withholding of largesse serves as a pulpit. Philanthropy, retracing its origins in the story of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and distributing it to humanity, is the embrace of our essential humanness. It is - fundamentally - a love of what makes us human. The ability to express ourselves through art is one of the few things that distinguish us from the other apes. Another is the ability to build and maintain democratic institutions and arrive at a civilized consensus. Because of one artist's (rather benign) exercise of expressing voice, a donor publicly intimidates an entire institution. A municipality considers merits and regulatory options, while a potential benefactor grandstands in social media. Such outbursts are the inverse of philanthropy.

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