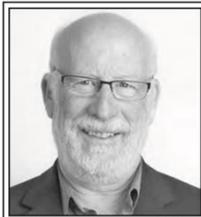




OPINION PIECE by Hal Wright

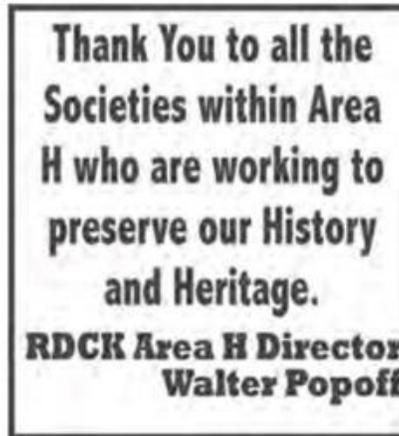
Public vs. Private Heritage Conservation



Richard Cannings, MP
South Okanagan - West
Kootenay
*Thank you to all the
individuals and groups
that work to preserve the
heritage and rich history
of British Columbia!*
Constituency Office: 1695 Columbia
Castlegar, BC Phone: 1-250-365-2792
richard.cannings.c2@parl.gc.ca



Katrine Conroy, MLA
Kootenay West
*Thank you to all the
individuals and groups
that work to preserve the
heritage and rich history
of the West Kootenay!*
Constituency Office: #2-1006 3rd St
Castlegar, BC Phone: 1-888-755-0556
Katrine.Conroy.MLA@leg.bc.ca



The above ads appeared in local newspapers during heritage week. I wrote to both Katrine Conroy and Richard Cannings to thank them for including “individuals” as well as societies in their ads. It indicates that they recognize the tremendous role that private citizens and businesses play in heritage conservation. This is something rarely acknowledged by government.

Walter Popoff’s ad, on the other hand, has an offensive aspect that I know I am not alone in noticing. Popoff’s message suggests that societies are the only entities other than government who care for our heritage. The prejudice is obvious.

An awareness of British Columbia history was barely awakening in 1958 when the centennial of the Colony of British Columbia was celebrated. A small number of historic sites (eg: Barkerville) were selected for financial support from the Province but an important role of the Heritage Conservation Branch was to create a network of historical markers throughout BC and to provide recognition to individuals and groups who were dedicated to preserving heritage. Indigenous history was barely on the radar. Most attention was focused on colonial history. In the 1960s, the government continued to acquire and manage a handful of historic sites but by the 1980s the Province was adamant that they no longer had the financial capability to continue acquiring, financing and managing historical assets. This was clarified in Sandon in 1988 when all 3 layers of government met with us to discuss this change of responsibility.

Since that time, provincial and federal governments have tried to download heritage responsibilities on local governments. Local governments typically do not have the resources or the skills to own and/or manage historic assets. Local governments try to download these on to “non profit” societies. All levels

of government fail to recognize the importance (and potential) of individual or corporate initiatives in the heritage sector and they do little to encourage it.

Societies are the lowest level of politics. While societies are expected to follow their constitutions, be non-discriminatory and to abide by codes of ethics and conduct, there is no will to oversee them or enforce the rules by either the provincial or local governments. And, in fact, the Registrar of Societies is adamant that they will not police societies. They say it is up to memberships to be self policing. Compliance with rules breaks down when democracy is not practiced within a society. If election fraud, stacking of membership by a special interest group or corruption of any nature occurs, societies become dysfunctional. When this occurs, and it often does, heritage resources suffer or are lost.

I am not saying that societies cannot work. There are good examples of societies that are functional, ethical and effective. These are typically found in stable communities which have a high degree of harmony. When there are many eyes and ears from a wide spectrum of citizens, self policing of societies has a chance to work. However, in smaller fractious communities (such as Sandon), societies become a target for self serving exclusive groups and are dominated or corrupted in a self-serving way. Or, they just fall apart. There are many examples. The heritage assets suffer.

Societies can be a very ineffective form of governance with a high potential for corruption. Yet, our governments apparently don't recognize anything other than societies as protectors of our heritage. The prejudice against individuals and private participants in the heritage world seems to be at an all time high. Not too many years ago, private sponsors of heritage conservation projects might have been welcomed or even recognized by awards and public acknowledgements. Not anymore. There is a prejudice against private initiative by governments which is obvious. Ironically, this is at the same time governments are trying to off load their responsibilities. What is the reason for this? Could it be that egos are making the decisions rather than intelligence? Are government authorities worried that the private sector will show them up? Even more concerning is the possibility that governments at all levels are engineering a psychological dependence of citizens on government grants, similar to Stockholm Syndrome where captives develop an unhealthy dependency on their captors. It can be seen as buying votes and stifling individual initiative. The current system of only dispensing government grants to "non profit" societies that suit the agendas of bureaucrats, is a very questionable system. It neither saves government money or efficiently protects heritage assets. It has also killed volunteering. Today, if there isn't a government grant provided to a "non-profit", usually the initiative dies there.

So, when Walter Popoff and others neglect to acknowledge the contributions made by individuals and businesses, they are ignoring the largest available sources of support for heritage conservation. In fact, there are relatively few of our historical assets that are preserved by government or "non profits". The vast bulk are privately funded, and in most cases, lovingly cared for. For example, virtually all heritage homes, farms, commercial buildings, etc are privately owned and supported. Locally, Nelson, BC is a great example with 350+ heritage homes, all of which are supported on the private tab. Consider all the vintage vehicles and artifacts that exist because of individual initiative and passion. Many heritage businesses do their best to survive and they do it without government funding. Industrial heritage survives almost entirely without government support or encouragement. An example of this is the Silversmith Generating Station at Sandon. It would be nice to see a thank you, some appreciation, or some evidence of moral support from government for the billions of dollars committed to heritage each year from private sources. Instead, we endure snobbishness that suggests, unless you are a "non profit" society, you don't count.

Amongst the non-profit societies which are ethical and law abiding, it is a fact that generally a minority of members do the majority of the workload. They also have the burden of all the administrative work to meet the governments demands. Burnout and disillusionment are common ailments of the “non-profit” model.

As government policies stand, the more individuals and private businesses do to preserve heritage, the more governments punish them. For example, when you restore your heritage home, the more the government will raise your taxes. This is obviously backward. Yet, we have heard lip service from government for 40 years about instituting tax concessions for private-owners who conscientiously maintain historic buildings. Sadly, it has been all talk and no do! Why should a “non profit” be eligible for grants for a fire suppression system for a heritage building while an outstanding heritage building owned by a struggling family be ineligible? What about government rhetoric about re-use, recycling and discouraging waste? Is it not environmentally preferable to continue using existing assets longer, rather than to perpetuate our throw away culture? So much of our heritage could still be useful today if government could just change its short-sighted attitude to reflect new realities.

I hope this opinion piece will strike a chord with its readers. I encourage you to take a stand to end senseless prejudice that government has developed against you, your property and your initiatives. Show Walter Popoff and other insensitive, uniformed politicians that you want to be recognized and respected for the things you do to preserve BC heritage.

Thank you for considering,

Hal Wright
Sandon, BC