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Publisher.....A. Sandy Harbinson
Advertising Mgr....Linda R. Harbinson
Editor.....Darren MacDonald
Advertising Rep.....Cheryl Kostecki
Admin. Asst.....Gayle Fournier
Co-op Student.....Marvin Fulton



Things were never as good as they are in our memories

It's a saying, an attitude, a state of mind that's been around as long as people have been around. How many times when you were young did your parents say "In my day . . .", or "When I was your age . . .", or the grand daddy of them all "In the good old days . . .".

It must be part of human nature to romanticize the past, or at least it's part of the way people remember things that filters out all the bad stuff that happened, and over emphasizes all the good. But as sure as death and the GST, as all of us get older, our childhood will suddenly becomes some kind of golden age when everything—and everybody—made sense and acted sensibly. A time when children acted properly and were polite and respectful to their parents, not like today . . .

In fact, all that really changes is your point of view. Skip back a few generations, it was considered bad for a child if he *wasn't* beaten. You simply weren't a good parent if you spared the rod.

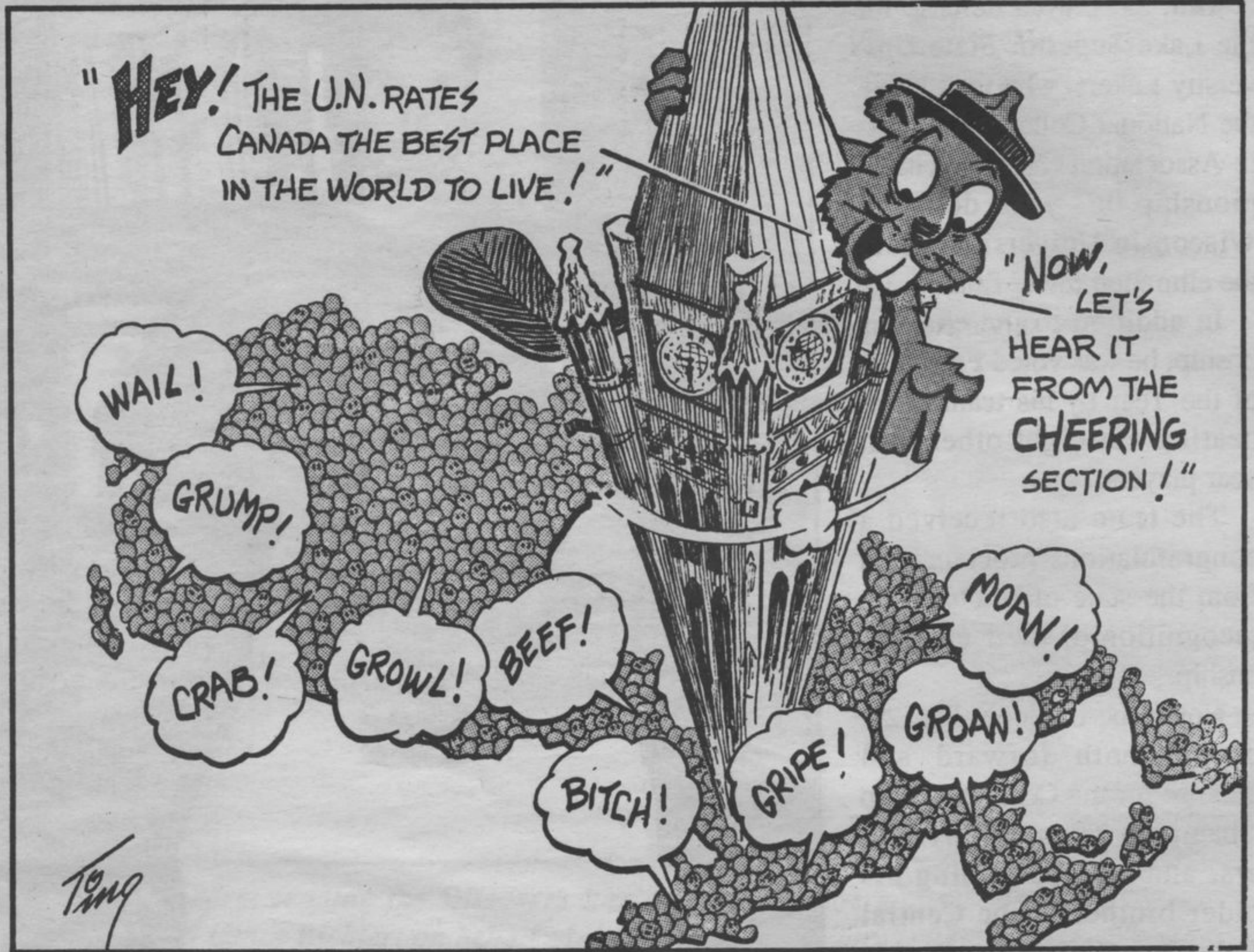
Parenting has evolved a lot since then, and today the debate centres on just what the role of the mother and father in raising children should be. Some people still think that a women shouldn't work and should stay home to raise the kids, but most people believe women should at least have a choice.

And then there's U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle. Here's a guy who believes that America's half-hearted attempts at social policy has destroyed the family unit which, indirectly, led to the L.A. riots. Not poverty, racism, lack of opportunity, a central government indifferent to minority concerns and a perception among blacks that they have no place in American society. No, the cause of the rioting was Murphy Brown and the attitudes she represents.

Not to say that there hasn't been an erosion in the kinds of values Quayle is referring to. Society has become much more tolerant of things like divorce, adultery, single mothers, etc.—all things that would have gotten you banned from polite society not that many years ago.

But if Quayle really wants to get to the heart of the matter, he shouldn't look at what society doesn't value, he should look at what it does. And any society that pegs financial success and personal power as its highest prize—as does America, and to lesser extent, Canada—shouldn't be surprised when its underclass expresses frustration at not being allowed the same chance to succeed and obtain the benefits of success

After all, the rioters looted stores to get the status symbols that go along with success: colour television sets, VCRs, stereo systems, etc. Items they would otherwise never get.



People can make you smile

"Life" Woody Allen once wrote, "is divided into the horrible and the miserable". A touch pessimistic, even for New York's nabob of neurosis, but some days such an observation seems distressingly close to the truth. Bandits in pin stripes hijacking the Dow Jones. Neo Nazis pushing back manhole covers and crawling out of the sewers of Europe and Asia. And South central L.A. Foreign factory ships calmly strip-mining the Grand Banks fish stocks. And over it all, the moist palms and false smiles of politicians promising, murmuring, working the crowd and passing oceans of oral gas. Some days you wake up, look around and wonder if Good Samaritans should be added to the Endangered Species list.

Endangered perhaps, but not extinct. A cursory poke into a thicket of weekend newspapers flushed three examples of the species. It made me feel good to learn about them. Maybe it'll work for you too.

First there's Thomas Walker. Mister Walker's a retired police officer who's developed the hobby of flying helium balloons from his backyard in Baltimore. Balloons . . . with money attached to them—some times a sawbuck, sometimes \$50. There's a little prayer attached as well, and Mister Walker's address and phone number. As for delivery, Mister Walker says he leaves that up to God. "I was upset that there were a lot of children killed last year" says Mister walker. "I wanted to sent something cheerful."

Then there's Shauneen McKay from the tiny town of Beeton, Ontario. Beeton's in Tecumseth Township. You need to know that so you can understand how Shauneen's like a lot of us—constantly reminded and eternally bummed out by the way we two-legged tenants mistreat the planet. She's heard all about the clear cuts in B.C., the burning rain forest in Brazil, the budworms spraying in New Brunswick and the acid rain everywhere.

Instead of wallowing in guilt, Shauneen

McKay chose to act. "I decided I might not be able to fix the rain forests, but I sure could do something about Tecumseth Township."

And she did. McKay got the local horticultural society mobilized. They blitzed for donations, and pretty soon they had enough to buy a big batch of ash, maple, linden and birch trees—all bargain priced because they were seconds. Come the first planting day McKay and her colleagues found 30 volunteers—housewives, seniors and kids from high school—leaning on shovels, waiting for instructions.



Arthur Black

Shauneen McKay and friends have done such a good job of greening up the outskirts of Beeton that other towns and their councils are following suit. And why not? Trees are the red corpuscles of earthly life. They filter junk out of the air and put oxygen back in. They control soil erosion, raise water tables, provide shelter for animals, windbreaks for drivers, food for countless species of wildlife.

Oh yes, and trees are easy on the eyes too.

My last Good Samaritan of the week? Well, I can't introduce you because I don't know the Samaritan's name. All I know is for the past month or so, somebody has been going up to a hydro pole at the corner of Islington Avenue and Elmhurst Drive in the north end of Toronto and hanging shopping bags full of groceries on it. Good stuff—eggs, fish sticks, butter, cheese. Nobody ever sees whoever leaves it there.

Don't know who the phantom grocer's trying to reach. Perhaps the same people Thomas Walker is trying to air express his money to. The people who'll benefit most from Shauneen McKay and her tree planting aren't even born yet. Those trees won't be done growing till long after Shauneen and you and I are planted ourselves.

Thomas Walker, Shauneen McKay and the Phantom Grocer aren't trying to save the world.

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