

Masters of misinformation

by PETER MENZIES

The Trudeau government has taken #fakenews, #alternativefacts, #misinformation, and #disin-formation to a whole new, breathtaking level.

Last week, the Liberals introduced legislation that will freeze the buying, importing, and selling of handguns and pretended gun owners won't be affected. You may agree or disagree with that approach, but what is clear is that if you own a handgun in Canada, you will now never be able to sell it or give it away to someone else. If you had a handgun collection that you thought you or your heirs might wish to sell at some point, that collection is now worthless. And you can never buy a new one.

Regardless, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wasted no time in cautioning a reporter ? chiding him really ? to be ?careful about spreading misinformation and disinformation about this.?

The bill is ?not targeted to law-abiding firearms owners. Those who currently own and operate handguns safely are not at all targeted by this legislation,? Trudeau said ? with a straight face ? before going on to explain the freeze that will prevent law-abiding firearms owners from selling, buying, or transferring ownership of handguns.

The most generous interpretation of that statement can only be that the prime minister didn't intend for this bill to have any impact on law-abiding gun owners. If that's the case, he either hasn't read his own legislation (possible) and should amend it (unlikely), or his aim isn't very good and the law-abiding gun owners are victims of a drive-by legislative shooting.

As noted above, you may think tighter gun control is a good thing or a bad thing. But what is definitely a very bad thing is this naked gaslighting of anyone (particularly someone who might actually have read the bill) who raises fact-based concerns about the impact of government leg-islation. It is, essentially, an attack on those seeking the truth.

This is particularly rich from a government developing legislation ? working title: Online Harms ? that would regulate what you can say on the internet in an effort to crack down on ?misinfor-mation and disinformation.? One assumes the new Online Harms act will not apply to the gov-ernment's own practice of characterizing the views of its critics as ?disinformation? while insisting only its, at times, fantasy-laden interpretations of reality represent the correct information.

Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino provided another example last week when he declared that new legislation regarding searches of people's mobile devices, texts, photos, and emails would ?institute clear and stringent standards that must be met before a traveller's device can be searched.?

It turns out there's nothing clear and stringent at all about giving border agents the power to search people's phones on the basis of something as bizarrely vague as ?reasonable and gen-eral concern.? The phrase itself appears to be something the architects of the legislation more or less just made up.

?The very low (and legally novel) threshold of ?reasonable general concern' for border officials to conduct a search of a traveller's personal electronic device does not adequately protect travel-lers' privacy,? wrote the Canadian Civil Liberties Association.

Or, as the Globe and Mail editorial board put it, ?We think the proposed legal standard sounds a lot like asking CBSA officer Peter Parker if his Spidey senses are tingling.? Not to be outdone, Innovation, Science and Economic Development Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne announced a ?historic step? toward a more consumer-focused policy on telecommu-nications, while the cabinet he is a part of upheld a regulatory decision that handcuffs efforts by small operators to offer consumers lower-cost internet service.

But the creme de la creme on the week went to Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez, who continues to insist that his Bill C-11, which gives the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) sweeping powers to regulate speech and other content on the internet, doesn't do things it actually does.

Despite waves of expert analyses and confirmation from CRTC Chair Ian Scott that the legislation does indeed grant the regulator the power to deal with social media posts, Rodriguez stood up in the House of Commons and once again declared it does not.

Either Rodriguez never read his own legislation ? the power to regulate social media posts is right there in black and white ? or he is intentionally saying things that aren't true.

If disinformation and misinformation are undermining Canadians' faith in their institutions, the cause appears to be the people who insist they are seeking a solution to a problem ? misinformation ? they themselves compound daily.

When it comes to the lust for power, the first victim is always the truth. The next one is you.

Peter Menzies is a senior fellow with the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, an award-winning journalist, and former CRTC vice-chair.