

Barbara Kay: There's no shame in looking after your family's interests

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The Late George Apley, John P. Marquand's 1937 novel, chronicles the life of a "Boston Brahmin," whose encounters with a fast-changing world trace the decline and fall of America's WASP establishment. In the novel's most famous anecdote, the protagonist's ultra-conservative grandfather, observing a nouveau-riche neighbour retrieving his morning newspaper from his stoop — in his shirtsleeves! — is so alarmed by this sartorial gaffe's implications for the neighbourhood's tone, that he immediately sells his mansion and moves to Back Bay.

Hilarious, right? Nowadays, sure. After all, artfully torn jeans are a status symbol today. But that canny grandfather understood the real estate market of his era. We can mock his superannuated snobbery all we like, but his instinct for equity protection was impeccable.

My Postmedia colleague Tristin Hopper would be deliriously happy if neighbours in shirtsleeves were his greatest domestic concern. I was rather horrified reading a Twitter thread Hopper started last week about his and his wife's move from Vancouver to Edmonton three years ago, in which he reported finding needles in his front and back yards. "Addicts are treating my community like a toilet," he wrote. A second tweet noted that the City of Edmonton had "opened FOUR safe-injection sites in the (city) core, ignoring resident pleas that their streets would soon be strewn with needles and public disorder."

Hopper's tweets kept coming. "SAFE INJECTION SITES REQUIRE DRUGS ACQUIRED THROUGH CRIME. It was ludicrous to believe you could ring the city's most vulnerable neighbourhoods with these sites without consequence"; and "These policies were planned and implemented by people who will never be affected by them"; and "We decided to have a family in large part because we thought Edmonton was a place with the courage not to let this happen. Now, we think about moving every day."

The long thread of Hopper tweets and replies is worth reading, because Hopper's complaints cover just about every issue associated with the principle of Harm Reduction, the foundational philosophical pillar on which safe-injection sites for drug addicts rest, while the responses to Hopper's anger provide a focus group of Canadian attitudes on the issue, ranging from sympathy for Hopper's situation to self-righteous indignation at his lack of empathy for addicts.

I was particularly struck by one reactive comment, "it shows how much disdain you have for people who use drugs when you say it's 'my community' and not theirs as well." That remark presumes a pretty loose definition of community.

"Community" usually means a residential area anchored by life-enhancing resources like parks, schools, sports facilities, cultural centres and so forth. For most of us, community implies a give-and-take relationship, often described as the "commons." The "tragedy of the commons" is a term used in social science to connote circumstances in a shared-resource system where a critical number of anti-social people act contrary to the common good of all members by depleting or spoiling common resources in their collective behaviour. And that is precisely the situation here.

In this particular tragedy of the commons, addicts are incapable of a "relationship" with the community in which they live. They cannot give; they are consumed by the need to take. Which is why they have no awareness of such niceties as what is seemly and what isn't, and no competence for social reciprocity — that is, for contributing to an environment in which mutual trust between strangers is the norm. One may have compassion for their plight, which is quite another thing from sacrificing one's own peace of mind and watching one's investment deteriorate in order that a small number of addicts relative to the entire addicted population may consume poison under supervision.

Tristin, you are right: The people who planned these sites don't have to live near them. If a condition of such policies were the presence of safe-injection sites in policymakers' neighbourhoods, we would see their instant conversion to the belief that drug courts were the way to go with addicts. Or forced rehab. Or "gated" addicts-only communities. Or any policy that ensured their own equity's security.

Let's face it. Our political views may vary, but the minute we take possession of our first home, we all share the bond of homeowner conservatism. NIMBY becomes our credo for any initiative that may pose a threat to the biggest investment most of us will ever make. The instinct to protect that investment is exponentially triggered when the first child is born. And so, Tristin, as it seems unlikely you will ever have peace of mind where you are, my advice to you, for what it's worth, is to sell immediately, even at a loss; then choose your next home with the ruthless self-interest of a latter-day Boston Brahmin, and without a smidgin of guilt.

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