

On Politics, Policies and Birds

Thoughts on the remarkable Rupert Downing

I first met Rupert after having moved to Victoria from Toronto
He had just moved out of the BC Government
Where he had created and led their Community Development unit
Being new to BC, I was looking for someone
Someone who knew the politics and issues facing this part of the world

I still recall my first chat with him at his home in Fernwood
The NDP had been defeated just before I arrived
I wanted to know what he thought lay ahead
He proceeded to run through the issues in every riding in the Province
Every one of them
Who were the key people, what were the key issues and what were the prospects for the future
I had never met anyone who could do that!

I followed with admiration as Rupert laid the groundwork for the creation
Of the still very important national social economic network, CCEDNET
As I was always interested in national policy options linking communities
To learning and action, I often sat with him to hear his views
His insights into who in the governments were supporting progressive issues
And how to get the attention of the Ottawa mandarins
Was always fascinating

During those years, our paths often crossed in Ottawa
Where he was pitching one idea or another
He knew more then and up until his passing about
Social economy, justice and what could be done
Then anyone I have known

All who have known Rupert know that he got his start
As a community organizer in the working-class neighbourhoods of North London
But he had also learned the acting trade and was part of a vibrant left-wing theatre world
That included Vanessa Redgrave and her other socialist friends
The only bone that I picked with him was around his support of the Tottenham Hotspurs
Being an Arsenal supporter, the other North London club, Spurs were our deadly enemies

Perhaps the most fun we had as friends over the years
Were our many fishing trips
We fished from Sooke most often
Sometimes from Port Renfrew

Catching Salmon meant being out on the water at dawn
Rupert was enthralled by the early morning light
The seagulls, ducks and eagles beginning their days
And even the seals hoping to steal a salmon from some unlucky
Fisherman's line

At the end of the days on the water
We packed up our salmon
And brought them directly home
To either his and Christine's place or to ours
We sliced a few of the modest sized sockeyes of cohos in half
BBQed them just hours from the sea
Sometimes we'd bring home some crabs
Crabs and salmon and a good bubbly wine

Rupert did not get sea sick
I had never been sea sick on our salmon trips as they were close to shore
But one year we decided to go after the celebrated halibut
Halibut preferred to live on an undersea dome
About 20-30 kilometres out in the Pacific Ocean

We found our location
Let down our gear
And waited for the soft bite from these large fish
We floated in one location directly over their sandy home
Our boat rose and sank in the rhythm of the swells

Well, the swells were deadly for myself and my friend Rajesh
Rupert was smiling enjoying the vastness of the horizon and the off shore breeze
When we got a hit, we would take turns reeling in the catch
Rupert went first and landed a lovely one
Then was my turn
As I reeled in the halibut I felt a rising,
Not of the sea
But in my stomach
And Just as my fish broke water
I returned my breakfast to the sea

And for the next few hours as we landed the fish
Rupert would smile
Then hand the rod to myself or my friend for our turn
My stomach behaved the same for every fish!

Rupert was brilliant and Rupert was eccentric!
He always carried a pair of binoculars for spotting birds where he walked
One time when we were walking behind our house in Cadboro Bay
A neighbour came out and accosted us and wanted to know
Why Rupert was using binoculars behind her house
Birds, we told her
Just in case of some interesting birds

But he also had a beautiful cockatiel as a pet
Now I know many will wonder what is eccentric about having a cockatiel for a pet?
A nice bird in a cage is always elegant.
But Rupert, siding as always with the oppressed of this world,
Liberated his cockatiel to live with him in his living spaces at home
His Cockatiel sat on his shoulder, spoke into his ear and flew about the room as it wished
Both of them were delighted

Rupert was our very own Doctor Doolittle
Always talking to the animals
And they would talk to him

Rupert, we celebrate your brilliance, your passion for justice, your ability to be totally yourself
You have been one of the most interesting persons that any of us have known
We miss you but know that wherever your spirit has flown, it will be with your animal friends
And with those whose lives were committed to justice
And any right-wing characters in your new world will be very worried about your arrival

Budd Hall
November 12, 2023

Our friend Rupert Downing died November 2, 2023 in Victoria, BC