

The new world border

Customs and immigration officers were once supposed to protect citizens. Today they guard the state



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On July 2, Jeni Dimitrova returned from Bulgaria to Montreal, where she has been working as a legal immigrant for two years. Her flight landed at Dorval International Airport—recently rechristened the Pierre Elliot Trudeau International Airport to remind us of a statist who contributed much to the demise of our liberties. The young woman's three pieces of luggage were thoroughly searched, underwear

included, for more than an hour. She finally had to pay duties and taxes of \$62.45 on a few gifts, personal items, and alcohol that she had neglected to declare. She also received a written warning that “a record will be kept of this infraction” and that “you may also be subject to increased examination of your goods and/or your vehicle when you cross the border.”

If anybody believes that the state's border cops exist to protect us from international terrorists, this banal event must seem incomprehensible. Time to revise our theories of the state.

The state was not always that interested in sniffing people's underwear. “The inhabitant of London,” wrote economist John Maynard Keynes about the pre-First World War world, “could secure forthwith, if he wished, cheap and comfortable means of transit to any country or climate without passport or other formality . . .”

But as the power of the state grew during the 20th century (“the century of the state,” as Mussolini hoped for) and new crimes were fabricated by legislation, border controls increased. The passport, which used to be a warning to foreign tyrants not to mess with the holder, has become a means for domestic tyrants to control their own subjects. Even when some border controls had to be relaxed because of technological change or demands for freer trade, states found new ways to peep into their subjects' international activities. Despite the lack of formal exit controls here (as opposed to Europe), border cops now have even the right to search you when you leave the country—for example, to check if you carry more than \$10,000 without having declared it.

Tyranny is a matter of degree, and our own tyrant is of the kindlier and gentler sort. Canadian border praetorians are not as bad as their colleagues in many other countries. Most of the time I re-entered Canada over the past several years and the praetorian asked me what I had been doing out of the country, I answered, “*Mes occupations d'homme libre*” (“My freeman's pursuits”). Only once, in the 1990s, did this answer provoke a virile encounter and a luggage search.

My little investigation of Mme Dimitrova's case led the Dorval customs higher-ups to realize that her personal exemption had been overlooked. According to customs spokesman Robert Gervais, more than half of what she paid will be reimbursed, and her remaining infraction will be removed from their computer system. The young, self-righteous, male border praetorian who performed this search was obviously overzealous.

Which brings me to the idea of arming border cops,

which is popular among some of my conservative friends. When the border praetorian proudly wears a pistol with a high-capacity magazine forbidden to ordinary citizens, will he be humbler and better realize that he is the servant, not the master, of the citizen in front of him? If there is to be an asymmetry, it should be in favour of the master over his servant—like in New York City, where, for two decades after the creation of the police department

in 1844, cops were forbidden to carry guns while ordinary citizens were allowed to. Until the citizens may legally carry at least equal firepower, no guns for border cops!

And note how Orwellian the new name of the Canadian customs is: Canadian Border Services Agency. Try to enter “your” country and not shop with them for your border “services,” and you will find out the difference between “services” imposed by the state, and the services you buy on the market.

I have another Bulgarian friend, Dr. Spiridon Kantardjieff, a neurologist in Sherbrooke, Que. He escaped Bulgaria in 1970 and discovered with wonder what was then Western liberty. But he rapidly noticed how our liberties were being undermined, and he says that Bulgaria has been catching up with him. **WS**

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