

## QUEBEC'S POPCORN COMPENSATION PLAN

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An empty popcorn machine is seen in the candy kiosk of a cinema as Quebec allows the reopening of movie theatres but not the selling of food and drinks. PHOTO BY REUTERS/CHRISTINNE MUSCHI

In the 2006 federal election campaign, Stephen Harper's Conservative party proposed giving parents of young children \$1,200 a year for daycare, though as it came in the form of cash they could in fact spend it as they chose.

In one of the worst election gaffes of all time, Scott Reid, director of communications for Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin, told CBC: "Don't give people 25 bucks a week to blow on beer and popcorn. Give them child-care spaces that work." Reid apologized shortly afterward but his comment reinforced the image of the Liberals

as the “we-know-better party.” Harper rode that and concerns about government corruption following the Gomery report to a 36 per cent to 30 per cent victory in the popular vote and 124 to 103 in Commons seats. Martin quit as Liberal leader the night of the election.

Popcorn is now stuck in the teeth of another Quebec politician, Premier François Legault. We’re on spring break this week in Quebec and the premier wanted parents to have something to do with their kids other than sit at home and put in screen time. So a couple of weeks ago he ordained that movie houses could open so parents could take their kids out and put in screen time. Because we’re still under an 8 p.m. curfew cinemas can only open during the day, which is fine: that’s when you want them open for kids. And physical distancing has to be observed, including the wearing of masks.

Right away you can see the popcorn problem. It’s hard to eat popcorn through your mask — even if the internet quickly came up with meme mask options that do allow popcorn through. On the other hand, it’s hard for cinemas to make money without their — let’s use the correct term, extortionary — snack bars open. (No parent who has every tried to shepherd his or her kids past an open cinema snack bar will think “extortionary” too strong a characterization.) In the cinema business, the concession stand regularly provides upwards of half the profit.

When Vincenzo Guzzo, head of Guzzo Cinemas, a major regional chain, pointed out that making money showing movies is impossible without selling marked-up food the premier decided his government would do what all 21st-century governments do when confronted with a political problem: spend taxpayer money to get rid of it. So he announced he would compensate the cinemas for not being able to open their snack bars. All credit to Mr. Guzzo. He responded by saying: “there’s no way I will be accused of taking public money to open my theatres ... I don’t want the money, I don’t want popcorn money ... I want to sell popcorn.” And he decided to keep his cinemas closed, except for their new COVID streaming service, until they can provide the full movie-going experience, i.e., film plus grossly over-priced treats plus the endorphin-triggering smell of fresh popcorn wafting over it all.

Why wasn't Mr. Guzzo going to be allowed to sell popcorn? You might think it's a case of "listening to the science." But I'm not aware of any scientific study that says it's safe to sit in cinemas wearing a mask but not safe to sit in cinemas the same distance apart wearing a mask you occasionally pull down or raise up for the purpose of ingesting food. The percentage increase in risk resulting from the time spent popping the popcorn into your mouth has not been determined, at least not in any double-blind study I've heard about.

Of course, the real reason popcorn can't be sold is that the premier was listening, not to the science, but to the bitching. Indoor dining in restaurants still isn't allowed in Quebec. Yes, snacking while looking at a big screen is different and conceivably marginally less dangerous than dining face-to-face at a table but the people who own — or, increasingly these days, owned — restaurants would be very annoyed if movie-goers were allowed to eat indoors while restaurant patrons still can't. COVID-19 may kill people's sense of smell and taste but the COVID pandemic has sharply heightened their sense of envy — as the off-the-wall, off-with-their-heads response to anyone taking a southern holiday makes clear.

So now we have the popcorn subsidy. Or, rather, the subsidy to make up for movie-goers not eating popcorn. Which is not unprecedented in the annals of government, some of whom around the world have paid farmers for not planting crops — not-yet-popped corn occasionally included. An interesting question for philosophers is whether the popcorn Quebec movie-goers will have paid with their taxes not to eat might have been made with corn that farmers somewhere in the world had been paid not to grow.

Philosophers will have ample time for such contemplation. Part of their job — of political philosophers, at least, along with economists — used to be to devise principles that would guide governments in deciding which activities they should undertake and which should be left to private agents. But with the state now providing compensation for popcorn not eaten, it's clear the only rule is: anything goes.

Absolutely anything goes.

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