



Reflexions on the Montreal Climate March

Description

On the event itself, on the people there, and on what they were saying

By **Irene Chwalkowski**

Images by **Robert Del Tredici**

I did not see Justin Trudeau. But I was told he had a run-in with an egg-throwing protester. They said it took three men to take the guy down; one dove at him, the other had him in a headlock and the third one, my mother who saw it on LCN said, shackled his feet together.

I did not see Elizabeth May, unless you count the look-alike I stopped on the corner of Belmont Street and Robert Bourassa Blvd. Her resemblance to the jolly posters of the Green Party leader plastered nearby was eerie. Her friend agreed.

What they all had in common were big grins on their faces. But then, there were a lot of happy faces in the crowd.

I did not see Andrew Scheer, the leader of the Federal Conservative Party, but then I heard he had sent his excuses. Ditto for NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, who was marching in British Columbia, I think.

I hopped onto the 405 Express bus at the leafy corner of Beaconsfield Boulevard and Lakeview in Beaconsfield at 11:00 am. At the Dorval circle, the bus filled up with dozens of young – mostly anglophone – students.



Parents boarded the bus with little children in tow. One blonde boy of 5 or 6 stood at the front of the bus and looked up at his mother as the bus took off in the direction of Autoroute 20 East. “I’ve never been on a bus like this before,” he said. Then he looked gravely at the passing scenery, a look of concern on his young face.

Buses and Bixi bikes were free all over the city including the buses travelling in from the South Shore and the West Island. City bus lines were disrupted on several lines.

There was no access to the city from Autoroute 720. There were no lanes open towards Montreal on the Victoria bridge, though two remained open heading to the South Shore. Robert-Bourassa Boulevard and the Bonaventure Expressway were closed entirely, in both directions.

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We all got off at the Lionel Groulx Métro and caught the Orange line. Meanwhile, the marchers, officially starting at the Sir George-Étienne Cartier Monument on Mount Royal, were an hour late, organizers said. A large group of marchers met at the Mordechai Richler gazebo. Anticipating congestion, March organizers had warned people not to take the Mount Royal metro. The West Island’s Raging Grannies – in their habitual colourful dresses and zany hats – sang their protest songs there. “There was a big crowd there,” said Vivienne Weisman as she handed me the lyrics to their protest songs.

Marchers weaved their way south along the Main and eventually erupted onto Robert-Bourassa Boulevard (formerly known as University Street).



The weather was perfect, the pace was relaxed but purposeful. The excitement was palpable. Helicopters swirled overhead until they flew ever lower and the wap-wap-wapping started to get on my nerves.

I saw a man on 12 ft stilts, dressed as a tree. The leaves on his head were real. I saw scores of bicycles, being wheeled to match the pace of the marchers. I saw people in motorized wheelchairs, and others being propelled by kindly souls. What they all had in common were big grins on their faces. But then, there were a lot of happy faces in the crowd.

It has been estimated that there were 500,000 of us. Half a million. The evening news reports said we looked like a colourful ribbon of moving humanity, but from my vantage point, I didn't see that either.

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I saw scores and scores of teens and students and young ladies. In a crowd of young people walking into Central Station, I saw one carrying a sign depicting The Simpsons' characters, on a march of their own. The artist smiled shyly, and in that quiet Canadian way humbly thanked me for my praise.

There was the blue on white CSN flags. the PQ flags. the Orange flags of Quebec Solidaire. Surprisingly, the Canadian flags were rare. I saw blue-collar workers, kids on skateboards, three girls wearing short shorts, and hundreds of signs, each one more provocative than the rest.

I saw an older gentleman with long white hair walking straight-backed by himself, smiling. I saw a group of 5 or 7 Hare Krishnas, in long white robes, ringing bells and chanting a beautiful song. They were cloaked in serenity and there were women following them, dressed in colourful pink and blue dresses and headscarves. They, however, did not sing.



I saw hijabs and turbans and a lot of baseball hats. I'm perfectly sure I saw Canadian francophone television and radio host and commentator, Alain Stanké – but then he always shows up at these things.

I saw support doggies with their masters – obviously demonstration veterans. A little beagle with light blue eyes looked up at me as she ran excitedly behind her dancing owner. “Her name is Waseeka,” the young man said.

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I saw Bixi bikes and the new scooters and some youngster carried battered skateboards. Cyclists rode in large circles, in and around the empty spaces in the crowd.

One office worker wore a green tie that did not match the rest of his outfit. I saw business types, headsets glued to their ears, talking excitedly to invisible parties. I saw a lot of good-looking men and women of all ages. I also saw a lot of grunge, and tattoos, and Rastafarians.



I heard young people laughing and skipping and breaking out into a run at one point – a whole sluice of them disappearing downhill at the tail end of the march. Maybe they got to see Swedish activist **Greta Thunberg** receiving a key to the city from Montreal mayor **Valerie Plante**, who distinguished herself in her first term by spending \$14 million on the acquisition of a large part of Angel Woods in Beaconsfield and by announcing plans for Cap Nature Pierrefonds West which will be the largest urban park in Montreal. By doing so, Plante has raised the hackles of several residential developers, whose plans to build 1500 homes in the L'Anse à l'Orme corridor are now being thwarted. In the latest news, the developers are planning to sue the Mayor. In an interview with CTV on the eve of the march, Plante said that she never owned a car in her life, until now, because "I can't ride my bike as mayor." The mayor urged marchers to leave their car at home. "It is easier said than done, but it is doable," she said. In the same report, Plante said that she was sharing her security detail with Greta Thunberg because "this young girl is being threatened for daring to express her views," she said.

The people I most clearly remember were the small babes in fatherly arms. They held them close to the chest, protecting them. Two-year-old, Charlie – her blonde hair tied back in four pigtails – was eating an apple while sitting on a concrete wall. "We are here for her," said her mother Nathalie Savoie. "Does she know what's going on?" I asked. "No. She sees a lot of people and there's a lot of noise," she said.

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In a rest area at Place Bonaventure, 2 1/2-month-old baby Nathan bellowed a heathy cry as his big brother took him in his arms. Nathan's Mom Pauline Reynier had a Parisian accent and she said: "We're here to protest against all the world's problems. We're here for him."



David Fletcher, co-founder of **The Green Coalition** (a group that brings together a large variety of green activists from Montreal and its environs) told Westmount Magazine that the bottom line is this. "The world does not need more children. I struggle with this thought. We had two kids, a boy and a girl," he said.

Fletcher said that 2.1 children is the threshold of replacement of the human species. "We are digging into the resilience of the planet right now," Fletcher added. "If we overshoot, we need another half planet in order to be sustainable."



The 79-year-old Fletcher is hardly optimistic about the future. “Things are going to get tougher. There is a belief that artificial intelligence and technology will solve our problems. (They) are selling us a dream.”

“There will be vote-splitting,” said Fletcher, who is parking his vote with the Green Party. “Trudeau is all-flash. He talks a good show,” he said.

He points to Trudeau’s pipeline project as an example of money being spent in order to bring us into the 21st century. “It was great to see the kids out there expressing themselves and it was pretty exciting to be there,” Fletcher said.

Indeed, I had stood next to a gaggle of young girls screaming as if they were at a rock concert. “They gotta do what they’re doing. There’s been a real decline in standards – the rest of the world will catch up,” he said. “Greta Thunberg is a wonderful young lady. (But) Greta’s people see only one side of the issue. They don’t look to see what’s on the other side. They will not bend,” he said.

‘I saw the most poignant sign of all. It said, in different coloured letters: ‘I’m here to give a voice for the children I am too scared to have.’

“The Montreal Climate Change March was a turning point for the Canadian elections – this generation doesn’t have the right to vote and they are reacting with an outcry and with horror,” Fletcher said.

Michel Gibson, the mayor of Kirkland, said in a phone interview with Westmount Magazine, that the climate march will not change the results of the vote on the West Island. “Everybody wants to be the saviour of the planet. All of the political parties have environmental platforms” he said.



“I like Trudeau’s carbon tax. It makes sense to pay for the carbon imprint we have on the planet,” said Gibson. “The



~~Greens will get more votes and they will be able to run more candidates – that’s good for them,” Gibson said. “The main thing is that it encourages young people to get out and vote.”~~

I saw the most poignant sign of all. It said, in different coloured letters: “I’m here to give a voice for the children I am too scared to have.” Alexa Houle, who made the poster, turned around on the corner of de La Gauchetière Street and Belmont to let me read it clearly. It struck a chord with me, a childless woman in her 50’s. That’s when it hit me: I must have been scared too, once upon a time.

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Hatley



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