

Why Is Canada Burning?

By [Walter E. Block](#) (July 2025)



The Forest Fire (Piero di Cosimo, 1505)

Hitler famously, or rather, infamously, asked, “Is Paris burning?” So legendary is this question that an actual [movie](#) was made on the basis of it. In the event, to the great disappointment of this mass murderer, the capital of France was not alight.

However, if the question were raised at present, “Is Canada burning?” the answer, alas, is that it is. Almost from sea to shining sea, Canada is on fire. The certainly includes northern British Columbia, as well as the Atlantic provinces. Most seriously afflicted with this deadly scourge are Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

What is going on here? What are the causes of this horrid affliction? There are several explanations bruited about. One is the perennial global warming. Another is too much flammable underbrush. A third is careless campers with out of control camp-fires and even homeowners with too aggressive outdoor grills. Then there is the situation that help from other countries has not been as quickly forthcoming as Canadian aid

to other nations has been in the past. There are also strong winds preventing planes from dumping massive amounts of water on the conflagrations where they are the most serious.

I would like to add another candidate to this sweepstakes: government owned forests.

Say what? We Canadians have always had Crown Corporations and other government owned woodlands. In any case, the personnel in charge of management are amongst the best in the world in terms of fire prevention. This arrangement is as inevitable as death and taxes.

No it is not. There is after all such a thing as privately owned timberlands. To be sure, there are some such in Quebec, Atlantic Canada and elsewhere but they amount to a pathetically small [6% of the total](#).

But why oh why would this make any difference? If anything, privatization would appear at first glance to worsen the matter as owners would just aim at profits. In sharp contrast, government employees have the public interest at heart.

The answer is straightforward. Thomas Sowell, one of the most brilliant economists never to have won the Nobel Prize in the dismal science (hint, hint, you Norwegians! Get with it!) had this to [say](#):

"It is hard to imagine a more stupid or more dangerous way of making decisions than by putting those decisions in the hands of people who pay no price for being wrong."

Who pays a "price" for the forest fires now plaguing Canada? Certainly the homeowners forced to flee. Also included are the insurance companies who will pay for the damage, and all residents who will soon see a sharp rise in insurance premiums. Add to the list is every Canadian who must breathe in the polluted air. This is so serious that our smoke-filled atmosphere has percolated all the way as far away as [Florida](#).

Did the people in charge of protecting Canadians from this menace lose a single penny over and above what occurred to every other resident of this country? Sorry, nickel. There are no more pennies in our economy. These folk might have even gained, in terms of overtime employment.

Present institutional arrangements are thus “stupid” and “dangerous.”

How would privatization improve matters? It is simple. All private forest corporations would be in competition with each other. Those that did a better management job, preeminently preventing fires, would earn greater profits and be able to expand their bases of operation. Those who failed at this task would lose money, and if they did not successfully address the errors of their ways, would be forced to leave the industry. They would then make way for more successful entrepreneurs. This is why we have pretty good shirts, shoes, bicycles, can openers, paper clips and pretty much everything else under a regime of economic freedom.

Have we learned no lesson from the relative success of West Germany and South Korea, which allowed private ownership, vis a vis their neighboring East Germany and North Korea, which stamped it out almost entirely?

Would privatization bring a total halt to this danger? Of course not. But the functioning of the free enterprise system in this corner of the economy would undoubtedly reduce it.

Want to decrease the probability and severity of the next spate of forest fires? Privatize!

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