

# Atwood launches assault on gov't with razor-sharp wit

BY HANNEKE BROOYMANS, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM NOVEMBER 20, 2010



Margaret Atwood

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EDMONTON — Margaret Atwood thinks Canada needs to set up a dictat-o-meter.

Similar to the famous clock that counted down the seconds to nuclear Armageddon, this clock would grade how close Canada creeps toward a dictatorship, said the famous Canadian author Friday in a speech to an audience at the Myer Horowitz Theatre.

A public debate would be needed to judge how much closer the meter would tick after parliament is prorogued, not just once, but twice, she said.

Atwood's at times tongue-in-cheek address, which garnered much laughter, was the keynote address of the Parkland Institute's annual fall conference, which runs from Nov. 19 to 21 at the University of Alberta. This year's theme is *Rewriting a Country: Toward a Just and Peaceful Canada*.

While Atwood delivered her dictat-o-meter suggestion with humour, it was only after she warned: "The

tools for repression and control are multiplying very quickly. Our government: What happened to 'open and accountable?' ... What happened to democracy?"

Atwood, who turned 71 on Thursday, said at the beginning of her speech: "My horoscope today said I should not make any unnecessary enemies." There was much laughter from the audience.

Later, she insisted, dryly: "I do not pick fights. Fights somehow break out in my vicinity." Atwood is an award-winning author of more than 35 volumes of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and children's literature. She is also famous for wading into public and political debates.

And she did not spare the current government any pointed criticism, saying they had turned into one that's all about "airplanes and jails. "The airplanes are useless against the real foes we face, which are scarcity and inequality."

As for the jails, who will fill them? she asked. "Is it a case of build it and they will come?"

She suspects what they'll do to fill those jails is just lower the criminal bar so they will have enough people to fill the jails. And then they can say, we told you so.

"Is the big idea really to bankrupt the social welfare system ... by spending all of our money on planes and jails?"

Gordon Laxer, director of the Parkland Institute, said at the beginning of the talk that many of us used to proudly wear a Canadian flag on our backpack when we travelled abroad. But no more.

"Canada is on the wrong side of almost every international issue," he said.

Among the many issues he listed were climate change, recognizing aboriginal rights, and killing deep oceans and river systems with toxic waste and tailings ponds.

Atwood said society doesn't need to head in that direction. A lot of books by biologists in the past told us we were inherently aggressive and selfish.

"The good news is we are rethinking the nature of human nature," she said. A recent book by Frans de Waal called the Age of Empathy gives us a different story about human nature. Humans have a built-in capacity for helping other people, joining with them for common causes, the author says.

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