Moveable dirt: Rob of the Pagé family is a walking reflection on the concept of sovereignty in Canada

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By Stephan Boissonneault

Most of us just dream about opting out, but Rob of the Pagé family has gone almost completely off the grid.

I NEVER questioned the way I lived until I met Rob of the Pagé family. Like most people, my life revolves around commodities that I come to possess through the financial system, money and banks. I am tethered to this system by money, records and pieces of plastic.

One day, shuffling for my bus pass, the binding of my wallet gave, and the thing burst. After I picked everything up, I noticed that I had five identification cards, each one placing me under the control of a financial organization.

For the next week, I pondered the idea of freedom and began to question why I lived this way. That made me wonder if there were an alternative.

When I mentioned this to my boss at the café, Kenny Dario, he regaled me with stories of Rob Pagé, who has lived off-grid, free from government involvement, since 2007.

"I drove out to his place and donated windows to him," Dario said. "He has a very critical way of looking at the world. After talking with him for a bit, I wanted to know more about his way of life. That was a while ago, and I still try to keep in touch with him."

After hearing Dario's tale and watching the documentary, *Ungrip*, by U.S. filmmaker Ben Stewart, about Pagé's life, I had a plethora of questions, about living off the grid in general, and Pagé in particular.
This led me to Barbara Perry, a professor of social science and humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa. Since June, Perry has been researching Canadian extremist groups and their motivations. She has discovered that there has been a resurgence in Canadian anti-government activity, led by sovereign citizens.

"It's difficult to actually date the interesting history," Perry says. "But it seems the Canadian context has grown out of left-wing anti-authoritarianism and anti-statism. But in recent years it has been influenced by the American sovereign-citizen movement."

Sovereign citizens believe they are free from all governmental jurisdictions and Perry adds that many have attempted to "divorce" themselves from the state's control.

After speaking to Perry, my curiosity morphed into a need to understand the philosophy. To do that, I had to talk to someone who had cut all ties with the government.

I sought out Pagé.

Pagé lives near Athabasca, Alta., in a self-sustaining house that he built out of old tires, which he calls *Earthship*.

It took a colossal amount of tires to build Earthship.

Earthship is a passive solar-heated house. This means meaning it does not have to rely on any mechanical or electrical devices. It meets all basic human needs for Pagé and his family and frees them from public utilities.

They get their electricity from solar panels that stretch the length of the house. The tire walls are filled with sand that acts as a thermal mass, storing heat, the way a battery stores electricity. During the day, heat is absorbed; at night, it radiates into the house. The average temperature of *Earthship* in winter is 17 C and, with a wood cooking stove going, it rises to a comfortable 21.

"If we were only dependent on the sun, we would never freeze in the winter," Pagé says. "That, in itself, puts our impact on the environment and our dependency on fossil fuels at a very different level than the millions of houses in Alberta."

RAINWATER and snowmelt flow into a cistern that acts as a reservoir. There is a pump to pressurize the water for washing dishes, taking showers and doing laundry.

Food is grown in the house, and in gardens. *Earthship* is surrounded by bush, which is home to edible mushrooms, berries and leaves.

"Living in *Earthship*," *Pagé says,* "allows us to provide for a vast majority of our needs, so that we no longer have to rely on the corporations that provide all of that stuff." *Earthship* was built after Pagé walked away from an IT career of 20 years. One day, he says, he asked himself whether he was a "physical being having a spiritual experience or a spiritual being having a physical experience."

He decided that he was the latter, and began to question his relationships with people and – more important – the state.

For Pagé, relying on external powers meant that he was not free. He was a slave. And he set out to free himself.

The first step was to write his own declaration of independence, using the U.S. document as a template. He rejected "the Crown and everyone else," as his master and declared peace. He sent the document to the Canadian government, the Queen, and the Pope.

No one answered.

"It was not about me asking permission," Pagé says. "It was about me setting boundaries and establishing my relationship with other people. I'm not looking for permission. I'm just informing them what my intent is. If they don't like that, that's their problem, not mine. My master isn't some fictional construct or some other man that is susceptible to greed or corruption."

Pagé considers himself free from the control of all authority, but that's not quite the way the law sees things.

"A sovereign citizen is not a legally defined term," Edmonton civil lawyer Jason Bodnar says.

Even though it is not legally defined, the Canadian government has called Pagé a sovereign citizen, a term he does not believe in.

"To suggest that I am a 'sovereign citizen' is insane in my opinion," he says. "That's an oxymoron. You can't be sovereign and a citizen at the same time, but they love to use that term and demonize it as chaos and anarchy. Well, anarchy is just having no ruler. It's not chaotic, but just governing yourself like a responsible adult."

A misty morning during the build of Earthship.

The separation of the two doesn't work for the Canadian legal system.

"Every person in Alberta is bound by Alberta law," Bodner says. "No person has greater rights than anyone else, and this is determined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms."

Pagé has a problem with the word "person." He says he does not identify as a person, but as a spiritual being. In fact, if you ask him what he is, he replies, "I am that I am" – which is, perhaps not coincidentally, the same answer God gave Moses.

"Person comes from the word 'persona,' " he says, "which is a mask, something that people wear to act. Corporation comes from the word corpus, which is a dead body. So we really have to be careful with these words when we're dealing with legal constructs, because they use these words to trick and manipulate people. I'm not prepared to play word games with people anymore, so I don't identify myself as a person."

BODNAR ARGUES that, from a legal viewpoint, this identification with the word person does not even raise an issue.

"The court knows what a person is. It's a human being. Even if someone does not identify as one, these acts in the court still apply to them. You don't even have to be a resident – just a person in Canada."

But Pagé doesn't believe he lives in Canada.

"If you see things the way I see them," he says, "where I'm a spiritual being in possession of this physical vessel, which we call a body, this body is only movable dirt. I can't live in Alberta or Canada, because they are corporations. I live on the land. A corporation is only a piece of paper."

Since his shift into a sovereign life, Pagé no longer has a birth certificate, driver's licence, Social Insurance Number, or passport. He has nothing to legally identify himself.

"The state is the war machine, and that's why I don't have anything like an ID from the state, because it makes me a soldier in their army."

It has been almost 10 years since Pagé made the transition into a sovereign life and, although he considers himself almost completely free, he still wrestles with the decision he made.

"Whenever I question it, my heart screams and says no," he says. "If I went back to it, I would be lying to myself and trying to stick my head in the sand in regards to what I see is really going on in the world: enslavement to debt and fictional constructs in a feudalistic society, as well as the rape and pillage of the Earth. From a spiritual point of view, I just can't bring myself to returning to that way of life."

You may notice that he used the phrase "feudalistic society." Feudalism (based on land ownership and rigidly divided into nobility, church and peasantry, with the last group being the property of the first) more or less died out at the beginning of the 16th century. However, Pagé strongly believes that we still live under that system.

After a little digging through old Canadian case summaries, you begin to understand his reasoning.

During an 1881 case in Prince Edward Island, there was a dispute over land ownership of the harbour of Summerside. A man named Charles Green had erected a wharf over the harbour that blocked ships from unloading goods, and the Crown wanted to reclaim the piece land. During the case – *Holman v. Green*, 6 SCR 707 – the Supreme Court of Canada ruled: "Pursuant to the provisions of the 146th section of the British North America Act, the land in question formed part of the demesne lands of the Crown belonging to that province."

This means that each province that joined the union was added to the demesne (King's domain) land; meaning the Crown has ownership over the land of every province within Canada – just as in a feudalistic society.

While we may not like to think about it in these terms, by paying rent, we are, in a way, part of a neo-feudal system. In Alberta, provincial law governs the disputes between homeowners and tenants. The provinces are part of the Crown's land, so the Crown is in control.

I can just shrug this off, but Pagé sees anyone caught in this system as a slave.

"No one can tell me that feudalism is dead. They may use different terminology now, but the same result is what I see in current political structures, and it matches the feudal system that started with William the Conqueror back in 1066."

It goes even farther than feudalism for Pagé. To him, we're all living within a fictional realm. (At this point in our conversation, my head began to throb.)

THE IDEA of a fictional realm such as the government, Pagé says, is something that has been constructed and ingrained into our way of life by schools, mentors, and other leaders. These fictional realms don't physically exist, but are constructs of our imagination.

Confused? So was I. This is how Pagé explains it.

"Can you show me the government of Canada? Physically, no you can't. It's more of an idea. There's no such thing as the government of Canada. There's people and buildings, but when it comes to the corporation, it doesn't exist. We personify these things and give them a life of their own, which is dangerous because they hold titles over property, vehicles, houses or whatever."

As Canadian citizens, most of us rely on these corporations for security and aid. Pagé does not.

"Most people depend on these corporations for basic needs," he says. "They have no clue where something like their food really comes from. They don't know how wheat turns into bread or how to use raw materials to grow their own food. If there were a natural disaster or something, they would be absolutely helpless. They're completely dependent, like a child.

"Over the last 10 years, we have acquired the skills and knowledge to survive if, lets say, the economy tanked and all hell broke loose. I know how to live off the land in times of disaster. So in my eyes we're better off than most people in the city by living in *Earthship* without the corporations."

Since Pagé does not own the land on which *Earthship* is built, he is still required to pay property tax. But he says he is in the process of retrieving the land.

"Removing the physical body from the feudal system is much easier than removing the land. I've been working with the indigenous because I believe that the Crown has made an egregious error in regards to their treaties. Its claim to the land is null and void because they have violated those treaties. Hopefully, in the next few years, we'll have some movement.

Earthship is Pagé's self-sustaining solar heated home in the wilderness.

"They also gave me a white feather, which is one of the highest honours an individual can receive from an indigenous tribe. I believe they gave me the name because of the way I live and my dedication to Mother Earth."

Pagé's life may differ greatly from that of most Canadians, but there is one constant to which he will always be tied – communication. To communicate with the outside world, he still pays phone and Internet bills like the rest of us.

"I never claimed to be 100 per cent off the grid and completely independent," he says. "If I was, no one would ever hear from me, and I would be out in the bush with no interaction with anyone."

To pay his bills Pagé earns his income by doing "odds and ends," jobs such as renovating people's homes.

"I need very minimal money in my life. My family and I can get by on $500 a month."

And that means that, unlike the rest of us, he doesn't have to go out and spend most of his time earning money to pay for things. Every day on *Earthship*, Pagé, his wife, their

two sons, and his mother-in-law work together, harvesting the garden, chopping firewood – whatever is needed to maintain their way of life.

"In the end," he says, "I can't take anything away with me other than my memories and experiences when my vessel dies. So I spend every waking moment with my family, and I would never change that for anything else."

Photos courtesy Rob of the Pagé family