

The background of the slide is a collage of Japanese 1000 Yen banknotes, tilted at various angles. The notes are primarily green and yellow, with some blue and red accents. The text is overlaid on this background.

Opportunity Costs

Elaine M. McPherson

Opportunity Costs

by

Elaine M. McPherson



GATTO PUBLISHING

This is an excerpt from *Opportunity Costs* by Elaine M. McPherson

All rights reserved; no part of this publication may be reproduced by any mean, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Opportunity Costs is published by Gatto Publishing
First published worldwide by Gatto Publishing in 2003
Gatto Publishing, P.O. Box 21524, Stirling, Scotland, FK8 3YW.
www.gattopublishing.com

Copyright © 2003 Elaine M. McPherson

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

ONE

I'm an economist and, therefore, know nothing about children. So the hullabaloo about the crèche is going completely over my head, other than the fact that I keep being pestered by idiot colleagues wanting me to sign their petition or represent their campaign. I want to tell them to fuck off, to say to them that the last thing I want to see at work is a bunch of screeching children - but, instead, I just smile and say that I don't think it would be appropriate for me to get involved.

Tam, on the other hand, does tell them to fuck off, before adding: "*Christ, the last thing we need in this place is more fucking weans.*"

I blame New Labour for all this child-friendly stuff. It's okay for them to pontificate about workplace crèches, and the like, because they spend most of their week away from home.

The workplace is no place for children. I mean, most of my friends - in fact, all of them - come to work in order to get away from their children. You know, the last thing they want is their beloved little ones twenty yards down the hallway.

The Victorians had it right, packing their weans off with nanny or sending them up chimneys.

I also blame all these sportsmen who've started bringing their weans out whenever they win some trophy or tournament. I mean, why? Why would anyone do such a thing? You have a child - so what? Does that mean that every time I make a correct economic prediction I should brandish my wean on my shoulders in celebration? I sincerely hope not because a wean I have not. Thankfully.

And all these celebs posing in *Hello!*, gazing adoringly at their offspring. What kind of perverted narcissism is that?

What is it about weans these days that they're so hip? I honestly cannot tell. Am I so out of touch with the times?

If forced to reflect on that question, I would have to respond in the affirmative, although, in my defence, while I may be out of touch with the times, I am not out of touch with the trends. After all, just because I'm not part of the loud-mouthed trendy-lefty politically correct upper-middle class, upper-middle income proclaimers of the social high ground, doesn't mean that I don't

understand them or that I can't see through them. Because, oh, can I see through them. Straight through them - and beyond - into the recesses of their hypocrisy and their emptiness.

I can't help it, it's a talent I've always seemed to have. The ability to cut to the chase, to cut through the crap, to see through the smokescreen, to weigh up people and situations in an instant. I don't know how I do it, I just do. It's inexplicable, like instinct and intuition. It verges on the psychic. In fact, if I hadn't had an intellectual bent I probably would have ended up being a psychic or an astrologer or something.

Instead, I became an economist, the acceptable face of the paranormal, the mainstream version of a psychic. And now I have the sort of respectability that would be the envy of every backstreet mystic - because I am never wrong.

This does not mean that my predictions are always accurate in terms of what eventually comes to pass; but they're always accurate in the context within which I place them.

You see, I live in a world of models; not the Kate Moss sort, the mathematical sort. Well, not strictly the

mathematical sort, because I'm hopeless at mathematics; but the economic sort. The best sort; the sort where you make up all the rules. Aka assumptions.

I deal in assumptions. I say that if x does this then y will happen. When y doesn't happen, I can say, *"Ah, well but x didn't do what we thought it might. You can't really predict these things. If x had done that, then y would have happened."*

QED.

It's great! I look at my models, I make my assumptions and then I make my predictions. And I'm never wrong, even when I am.

So I can't be wrong about this crèche business. As Tam so eloquently puts it: *"Fucking weans. It wouldnae be so bad if they were useful. You know, we could get them to make the coffee or something. But you're no' allowed to dae that these days. Christ. I remember I used to get sent out to buy fags for my dad. 20 Players, untipped. The sort that turned your lungs black. I was about eight. So what? Big deal. Christ, these days you'd be hauled in by the social workers for neglect if you did that. Fucking social workers."*

Tam is a gruff Scot; the caricature Scot (criminal or cop) you see on all those detective series on the TV; the Scot that everyone thinks every Scot is like; the Scot that gets Scots so riled they phone up *Points of View* to point out that not all Scots are like that.

How he got a job in our place I do not know because sheer talent is usually not enough. Usually, it takes an old school tie and knowing which names to drop to get into our place. Except it didn't for me and a few others who were taken on as part of their scheme to bring in people from the provinces (i.e. anywhere outwith SW1) and provide opportunities for those pathetic individuals (i.e. me and Tam) who don't have the benefit of private schooling and an Oxbridge education.

So I'm the token middle class female and Tam's the token jock. Unfortunately for them, we are their two best employees. The two stars, loathed and detested by the rest of the company for our ability and influence. Not to mention our rewards. But although the others loathe and detest us, they have to schmooze with us because of our ability and influence. Sometimes their sycophancy knows no bounds. But we know, Tam and I, that they loathe and detest us and they know that we know.

So, all in all, there is a perfect, if bitter, equilibrium in the company, with their envy perfectly balanced by our self-satisfaction. Given there are many more of them than us, this gives you an idea of the extent of our self-satisfaction. But we do have to compensate for their volume.

Tam and I can gaze out at the troops from our large, glass-fronted offices. If we set the blinds to a certain angle, we can see them but they can't see us. So they never know if we're watching them or not.

Sometimes Tam and I shut ourselves in, pretending we're having a high-level meeting, make a huge pot of coffee, open a box of chocolates and peer at them all afternoon. It's amazing what people will do when they think they're not being watched - even in an open plan office. We've seen it all: nose-picking, arse-scratching, hair-combing, lipstick-putting on, newspaper-reading, clothes-changing, pocket TV-watching, illicit kisses-stealing. Almost everything except what they're meant to be doing.

They think we don't understand them, Tam and I. But the truth is that we understand them only too well because we used to be them. Why do people think that

the most basic human instincts change when you climb the greasy pole? Tam and I are as lazy and sleekit as we've always been - it's just that we can get away with it now. What it comes down to, fundamentally, is that Tam and I can produce results with what, in our terms, is minimal effort but what, to other people, appears like considerable toil. There's no secret to success - it's just a matter of natural talent, hard work, perseverance, and single-mindedness, or indeed a product of any combination of these four things. But while each of these individually is a necessary condition, it is not, alone, a sufficient condition. Which is why Tam and I are the ones sitting in the big glass-fronted offices and the rest of them are sitting out there.

"Look at Natasha," Tam says to me, "she's a lazy bitch."

"Hhmn," I reply without looking up from my monitor.

"Coffee?"

"Please."

"I mean, she just uses this place as a refuge from her weans," he says, passing me a mug of steaming coffee.

"Wouldn't you if you had five of the little blighters?" I muse.

"Has she ever not been pregnant or on maternity leave in the last few years?"

"I don't think so."

"Jesus. If I was Simon, I'd cut my dick off so she couldn't have any more."

"Oh, Simon likes her pregnant and barefoot in the kitchen."

"If only she were in the kitchen. Can we no' get rid of her?" Tam asks, lighting another cigarette. "She's useless."

"I know. But by the same token, she's harmless. And as long as we have her, we can get rid of other toss-pots without being accused of being unsympathetic employers. Toss-pots who are dangerous rather than just useless. Like Molly and ..."

"Hysterical bitch."

"... Gary."

"Idle little toss-pot."

"Wasn't he?" I laugh.

"They wouldnae be so bad if they had the initiative to get away with it."

"Like you, you mean?"

"Exactamundo, darlin'," Tam smiles. "Anyway, what's your fuckin' prediction, smarty pants?"

"Half a percent on the base rate," I begin, leaning back in my reclining leather chair. "Inflation down quarter point, pound stable, dollar down, strong mark, forget the euro, marginal growth ..."

"That'll do. Time to go and make money!" Tam gleams. "See you when I've made our next million."

"Whatever," I reply, feeling the warmth of satisfaction spreading over my body.



**GATTO PUBLISHING
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
2003**