

# Welcome to CHAZ

*Shôn Ellerton, June 25, 2020*

*From comedy to tragedy, one of the most extraordinary events of 2020 is the creation of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle.*



In the heart of Seattle lies a six-block enclave taken over by various ‘freedom’ movements in which the police are not permitted to enter by decree of the mayor, Jenny Durkan. It consists of, primarily, commercial store frontage, an abandoned police station and a large recreational park for family picnics and games. Around its perimeter, concrete blocks and various placards remind one that they are entering CHAZ, which stands for Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone. Incidentally, they have renamed themselves as CHOP, standing for Capitol Hill Occupied Protest zone, from which has sprung up a new term for the residents. The Chopistans! However, I still prefer the name, CHAZ, as it so nearly rhymes with the British derogatory word, [\*chav\*](#), for someone with brash and loutish behaviour, of which many are in abundance in the great community of CHAZ.

What does CHAZ look like you might wonder? For a start, the ‘borders’ of CHAZ are patrolled by potentially-armed shady-looking individuals ensuring that no ‘riff-raff’ gain entry to their utopia including the Seattle police, Fox News reporters and anyone wearing a red hat or wearing a shirt with a correctly-oriented stars-and-stripes flag sewn in. The very notion that this could be permitted to happen in the first place is almost unthinkable if we were to cast ourselves back a year ago. I asked other friends and colleagues what they think about CHAZ but, surprisingly, none of them have even heard of it, which is a shame, because CHAZ is providing one of the best sources of entertainment on our screens (in a Big Brother reality TV show kind of way); however it looks like it is soon to be dismantled if not already by the time this is published.

## What does it look like?

On entering CHAZ, it appears that all is well and good. Apart from the copious amount of graffiti defacing just about any available flat surface and the sight of boarded-up shopfronts, the people look reasonably happy and content. As for the graffiti, most of it appears to be mindless scrawls peppered with offensive language of limited vocabulary along with a good dose of badly drawn human genitalia as an expression of art. The occasional genuinely impressive mural can be found; however, even these have not escaped the spray-can of graffiti vandals. Most of the denizens seem to be well-behaved and even practice hygiene by wearing facemasks although whether it is for anonymity's sake rather than for health reasons is open for comment. You have 'tourists' taking photographs of murals and memorials of fallen victims and others simply there to watch the various demonstrations which regularly take place in the park by a variety of speakers. Families with children can be seen, although I can assure you that I would not, for one moment, contemplate taking my kid there for reasons I shall dwell upon later. There are stalls offering free drinks and goodies, picnics on the lawn and groups of hippies smoking pot or consuming fungi from the genus, *psilocybe*. Probably not much different to a typical busy Saturday afternoon in a Seattle park at the best of times!

## Protesting and demanding

I took some time to listen in on some of the speeches being held live in the baseball park. The [Extraction Attraction](#) channel on YouTube has a variety of videos to choose from; however, this one in the [link here](#) contains the speeches I listened in to. You will need to start around the 2-hour mark. Some of the speeches are, frankly, just hyped-up rhetoric and sensationalism, whereas some are truly informative, well-delivered and meaningful with salient and important messages for all to take home. For example, the issue of the increasing wealth gap between the ultra-rich and of those who live on a day-to-day basis was discussed by some of the speakers. The lack of affordable healthcare for all, a service which is taken for granted by many countries in western Europe, was also discussed. These are, indeed, problems that affect so many regardless of race, creed, or colour. On the flipside, some of the speakers were simply parroting their ideals on dismantling capitalism, de-funding the police (some wanting to get rid of them altogether) and, to generally create an anarchy, not just without a governing body, but one with no rules. However, despite the

chaos, the protestors at CHAZ managed to create a list of 30 demands to satisfy their cause. Should I have been there in Seattle, I would not have minded sitting there on the grass with a beer while listening to the speeches and their demands whilst having conversations with others around me. It would have made an interesting day out.

One may be thinking what these 30 demands are. In summary, here they are. Apart from a few, most demands are wildly-optimistic and fantastic in the true sense of the word.

1. That the Seattle Council and the Mayor defund and abolish the Seattle Police Department (SPD);
2. That the use of armed force by police be banned entirely;
3. An end to the school-to-prison pipeline and the abolition of youth jails;
4. That the Federal government launch a full-scale investigation into past and current cases of police brutality in Washington State;
5. Reparations for victims of police brutality;
6. That the City of Seattle make the names of officers involved in police brutality a matter of public record;
7. A retrial of all people in colour currently serving a prison sentence for violent crime by a jury of their peers in their community;
8. Decriminalisation of the acts of protest and amnesty for protestors generally;
9. The City of Seattle and the State Government release any prisoner currently serving time for a marijuana-related offence;
10. The City of Seattle and State Government release any prisoner serving time just for resisting arrest if there are no other related charges;
11. That prisoners currently serving time be given the full and unrestricted right to vote;
12. An end to prosecutorial immunity for police officers in the time between now and the dissolution of the SPD and extant justice system;
13. The abolition of imprisonment, generally speaking;
14. Replacement of the current criminal justice system with the creation of restorative/transformative accountability programs;
15. Autonomy be given to the people to create localised anti-crime systems;
16. The SPD, between now and the time of its abolition in the near future, empty its lost-and-found and return property owned by denizens of the city;

17. Demand justice for those who have been sexually harassed or abused by the SPD or prison guards of the state of Washington;
18. That between now and the abolition of the SPD that each and every SPD officer turn on their body cameras with feeds being made available to the public;
19. That the funding previously used for SPD be redirected into socialised health and medicine, free public housing, public education, naturalisation services and general community development;
20. The de-gentrification of Seattle, starting with rent control;
21. The restoration of city funding for arts and culture to re-establish the once-rich local cultural identity of Seattle;
22. Free college for the people of the state of Washington;
23. That between now and the abolition of the SPD, that Seattle police be prohibited from performing homeless sweeps;
24. A decentralised election process to give the citizens of Seattle a greater ability to select candidates for public office;
25. The hospitals and care facilities of Seattle employ black doctors and nurses specifically to help care for black patients;
26. The people of Seattle seek out and proudly support black-owned businesses;
27. The city create an entirely separate system staffed by mental health experts to respond to 911 calls pertaining to mental health crises;
28. The history of Black and Native Americans be given a significantly greater focus in the Washington State education curriculum;
29. That thorough anti-bias training become a legal requirement for all jobs in the education system;
30. The City of Seattle and State of Washington remove any and all monuments dedicated to historical figures of the Confederacy.

Once all these demands are met, the occupiers of CHAZ will relinquish its six-blocks back to the City of Seattle and go home in triumph handing over the bill to clean up all the damage to the taxpayers of Washington State.

## Night-time in CHAZ

Going back to what I was saying about life in CHAZ, what happens after the sun sets? This is where it gets interesting. In Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, a fantasy adventure of a Tamil boy who finds himself in a small rowboat stranded in the

middle of the Indian Ocean, sharing it with a rather fierce tiger called Parker. He comes across a very strange floating island made of algae and other weird sinuous greenery containing pools of fresh water, a forest of trees and lots of friendly meerkats which just happen to make good eating as well. However, at night, the island turns strangely evil and the greenery on the ground dissolves and digests any animal in contact with it unless one is fortunate to be safely up a tree. Not unlike this, CHAZ can take a turn to the dark side after the sun sets. Skirmishes break out in the streets. The occasional firing of a gun originating from somewhere within the darkened no-go alleyways behind positioned concrete barriers. Bonfires being lit in the middle of streets while drunks aimlessly throw beer bottles about. Graffiti vandals clamber up drainpipes and tiptoe around building ledges looking for any available space to portray their 'art'. However, to be fair, much of the area around the park seems peaceful enough by what [footage](#) I saw from those filming undercover. There were hundreds of tents camped out around the perimeter of the floodlit sports park, refreshment stalls open and wandering souls taking in the night air. It looked not unlike the end of the day at any outdoor music festival, except without the music. However, when a Fox News crew tried to get in at night, it got a little ugly in CHAZ. Denizens are hellbent to ensure reporters, especially those from outlets like Fox, do not come prowling in. There is [great video footage](#) of a Fox reporter and her crew being literally mobbed by the denizens. The video shows maddened protestors not unlike bumblebees on acid coming out of their hives to intimidate the film crew hoping that Fox News and Co will make a hasty retreat. It looks, remarkably, like a scene straight out of a zombie movie ending with, and I kid you not, the reporters being ushered quickly into the forecourt of a local fire station in which the officers made fast the see-through garage door while enraged zombified protestors with whites around their eyes and outstretched arms were scratching at the door trying to get in. It could have been the famous shopping mall scene in George A. Romero's [Dawn of the Dead](#) movie.

## The Trump Walkabout

The funniest [footage](#) from CHAZ that I watched was of a stocky, large white man in his, I'm taking a guess, in his 50s, replete with MAGA cap and Trump T-shirt walking around with the stars-and-stripes flag proudly poised over his shoulder on the end of a long flagpole and frowning like Trump normally does. He does not wear a facemask. As soon as he enters CHAZ, sure enough, the

bumblebees on acid are, again, aggravated and immediately swarm towards the fellow. At first, everyone sort of maintains their distance looking somewhat stupefied not knowing quite what to do. Progressively, verbal abuse starts to get hurled at his direction along with others giving him advice that he does not belong there and that this is no place for him and that he should leave immediately. So, imagine this surreal image of this guy being surrounded by confused and angry folk with their facemasks on. Some of the others make every attempt to stop the rest of the mob from pestering him stating that he has every right to protest against the protestors but this does not seem to take sway with most of the hardened determined to intimidate him and take away his flag. And then, someone does just that and runs off with his flag; however, he just keeps marching on with his flagpole minus the flag, of course. Shortly afterwards, another dude runs towards him and steals his red MAGA cap and disappears quickly. Completely unperturbed, our Trump impersonator casually reaches in his pocket to reveal an identical red MAGA cap and casually dons it on his head. After which, when he reaches the park, one of the protestors hands him back his flag and helps him re-attach it back on to the flagpole. Immediately after, this stoutish black woman pounces on the flag trying to rip it off him but she is stopped by the others. He then stops in front of a sort of memorial spot where portraits of fallen victims of police brutality are pinned up on the side of a building when this young woman starts to issue out a wokeful dialogue that what he is doing is very traumatic and very disturbing and that this is not for him. When things, apparently, cannot get any sillier, that same raving black woman materialises again and grabs the flag even more determinately. She proceeds to do this for the next few minutes pulling and tugging just like when one plays tug-of-war with the family pit bull terrier. Throughout all this charade, our impersonator manages to retain his composure beautifully. The art of satire is clearly alien to many.

## An interesting experiment

All in all, CHAZ is an interesting experiment and one which I have been following. It has become a magnet for other groups other than those fighting for racial equality and police brutality. They include the alternative, the disaffected, the poor and struggling, the anti-capitalists, and simply those who are a little bored and want something to do. They know they cannot be truly autonomous, hence the name-change to CHOP; however, they have made a valiant attempt at growing their own vegetables and creating their own power through solar

panels, although in the wide scheme of things, this is largely symbolic. They have their own official website, [chaz.zone](http://chaz.zone), which is as crude as it comes and appears to have stopped being updated on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June. However, it does feature interesting and amusing links about CHAZ. With CHAZ, I find some interesting comparisons with George Orwell's [\*Animal Farm\*](#), a story of a bunch of farmyard animals revolting against the slavery of being owned by Mr Jones, the Farmer. They revolt against Mr Jones chasing him away from his farm. The pigs create the society and end up at the top of the pecking order while the sheep, horses and chickens are the uneducated working class who, effectively, are told what to do by the pigs. It is a clever parody of Stalin's Soviet Union. It appears that CHAZ has its hierarchy starting at the top with music artist, Raz Simone, acting as the 'warlord' although this does not appear to be confirmed to the best of my knowledge. Moreover, not unlike *Animal Farm*, the movement created other inequalities, the very thing they were fighting for in the first place. For example, specific areas in the park during certain times of the day were exclusively reserved for those of African American descent, the perimeter of which, interestingly, was guarded by white people. Another extraordinary moment was when one of the speakers announced that anyone of white descent give \$10 to any African American before leaving CHAZ.

## It always ends with tragedy

Sadly, not many days later, two shots were fired from a gun and it was reported that one was a fatal shooting whilst the other a critical injury. Reports suggest that the police were hampered on their way into CHAZ to investigate. For most, it is obvious that such a place could not exist in peace for very long and, as a result, the mayor of Seattle, Jenny Durkan, vowed to dismantle CHAZ. In hindsight, she probably should have never permitted it to rise in the first case. Meanwhile, in the opposite side of the United States in Washington DC, protestors attempted to create a new zone called Black House Autonomous Zone or BHAZ close to the White House but failed when they were outnumbered by the local police.

## Thank you for visiting CHAZ

I did enjoy watching what was happening in CHAZ and, in a funny sort of way, it will be sad to see it go, at least from an entertainment point-of-view. Unfortunately, that first wave of euphoria for those experiencing the newly

found freedom of CHAZ had ended long ago, much like in *Animal Farm* when the intellectual pig, Snowball, gets ousted by the main pig, Napoleon, and a new regime is implemented. Thankfully, I am not aware of too many casualties and only of the one fatal shooting, but I fear that if CHAZ should remain as it is, there will be more fatalities and casualties to come. Something that *most* of us do not want.