



How would Mother Nature run the economy?



ROBERT

IN ONE of his first statements as the new Governor of the Bank of Canada, Stephen Poloz told finance reporters that the Bank had done enough to stimulate the economy. It was now time, he said, to “let Mother Nature do her usual job.”

Mr. Poloz did not elaborate on his vision of Mother Nature and her usual job. But we can be pretty sure he was not planning to place Canadian banking in the hands of the ancient goddess of field, forest and fertility, however delightful that thought may be.

Like his fellow central bankers, Mr. Poloz is still resuscitating an economy whacked by the 2007-2008 financial crisis. To spur recovery they have been forced to set ultra-low interest rates and make other extraordinary interventions to entice private sector moneybags into job-creating investments.

In that context, letting Mother Nature “do her usual job” means backing off from further stimulation and resurrecting the battered dream that automatic economic stability can be assured by modest regulation, market discipline, mutual interest and the fear of chaos.

And so Mother Nature has become the goddess of market theory. It is her invisible hand that guides the predators in pinstripes as they prowl the corridors of hedge funds and derivatives, squeezing mortgage holders and stretching credit card debtors. It is her nudging that must keep yet another feeding frenzy from bringing down the house. And when another financial crisis happens, it will be because Mother Nature has not done a good enough job.

That is not the version of Mother Nature revealed by a Google image search. There we still find the familiar fecund, green and nurturing figure surrounded by (or constructed of) vegetation, songbirds and butterflies.

It is also not the traditional flip-side version of Mother Nature – the goddess

displeased, stirring up the oceans, shaking the ground, sending floodwaters and drought, fire and frost. Refusing to be predictable, demanding respect and punishing bad behaviour.

Those ideas are old. They come from times when we were much more obviously immersed in the larger environment and didn't imagine that we were in charge. The prolific and dangerous sides of old Mother Nature represent the rich and primordial

the language of finance, defending natural and social capital.

Surprisingly, however, the governor of the Bank of Canada still finds it necessary to invoke the authority of nature. And he is following the well-trodden path of countless other marketing professionals who label their products as “natural.” The seller of soaps or sausages expects the consumer to associate natural with wholesome, genuine and pure. The defender of monetary

Can Mother Nature now be guiding the predators in pinstripes as they prowl among the hedge funds and derivatives?

world of basic tensions and continuous cycles – sunlight and entropy, retention and innovation, failure and learning – in which humans and the biosphere are joined.

Old Mother Nature does not fit well in the modern world. In today's dominant institutions, nature is important only as a set of resources, and even humans are reducible to monetary value. Non-resource nature is priceless and therefore valueless. The only human capacities that matter are those that serve commercial initiative and wealth building.

In this world, all that remains of the two sides of old Mother Nature are greed and fear – the least worthy of all human characteristics, now favoured as the most reliable drivers of market behaviour. And even the most devoted advocates of nature and community can rarely gain official attention unless they present their case in

policy anticipates an association with what is deeply rooted in fundamental reality and therefore beyond questioning. Both recognize that even in a world devoted to artifice, most of us still see nature as a big part of the test of whether something is good or not.

We may not embrace Mr. Poloz' version of Mother Nature or celebrate his attempt to appropriate her influence. But we can welcome his recognition of nature's importance and use it as an opening to take the idea seriously. Now is an excellent time to ask what a true embodiment of nature might do if she ran the Canadian economy. **RG**

Robert Gibson is the chair of **AJ's** editorial board and a professor in the Faculty of Environment at uWaterloo.