Reflections on the Canadian malaise

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June 2013

Cela se prononce comme on a peur de l’écrire
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Introduction

According to the Environics Institute FOCUS 2012 survey results, a majority of Canadians believes the country is heading in the right direction, expresses increased confidence in their system of government, and comparatively “less concern”, “continued comfort”, and “less worry” than citizens of other countries about most aspects of their lives.

However, when probing below the surface of these celebratory results, one discovers a very large number of paradoxical and disquieting fault lines that hardly find any echo in the overall tone of the survey results, and that would appear to be systematically kept out of Canadians’ consciousness: the largest yet recorded cleavage between Quebecers (34%) and other Canadians (83%) expressing a sense of pride in being Canadian; boasting confidence in the health care system, despite a large number of serious studies pointing to an imminent crisis situation – and consequently considerable reluctance in the citizenry to agree to any sort of fundamental reform; a similar schizophrenia and denial that any change is required in the face of the impending pension crisis; paradoxical support for the current high level of immigration concomitant with high and increasing concern that immigrants integrate less and less well economically, and do not adopt Canadian mores, etc. On all these fronts (and there are many more) there is a certain culture of contentment, and even when significant concerns break through the citizen’s denial system, and are reluctantly acknowledged, it would appear that they never trigger any commitment to significant correctives. Contentment and inertia prevail.

Although the regional and local media are filled with news reports about the significantly defective functioning of the material and social fabrics of our socio-economy – from decrepit infrastructures, ineffective education and health care systems, serious problems of social integration, etc. – these warning signals are occluded nationally, and there appears to be no pressure from the citizenry, and no taste among the governing circles to even acknowledge the need for significant repairs.

1 Canada is not necessarily the only country in this situation. A recent document has highlighted the sort of frightening information available weekly in local and regional media in France that never gets reported in national media, and therefore never seems to permeate the national consciousness. It showed an immense gap between reality and what one can only regard as the manufactured national percepts (Laurent Obertone 2013. La France – orange mécanique. Paris: Editions Ring). While the situation might not be as dramatic in Canada yet, the same degree of cognitive dissonance and willful blindness may be said to exist here.
Few appear ready to acknowledge the possibility that a major disease has struck our democratic societies: blinding them to threatening realities, making them vulnerable to programming, and leaving them because of an induced lethargy\(^2\) unwilling and unable to respond to the toxic circumstances that promise irreversible harm.

Why is there so little that we are willing to do now in the face of predictable catastrophic outcomes? Worse still, what might we offer as an explanation when our grandchildren ask – and they will – why we have failed to be more responsible trustees of their future?

In this short note, we first draw attention to a small sample of situations bearing omens of predictable irreversible damage in the making that both citizens and governments seem to willfully refuse to recognize. Second, we look into the assemblage of psycho-social systemic slippages that might be responsible for the negligence that is likely to lead to impending tragedies. Third, we hint at the foreseeable toxicity of this cascade of slippages if the syndrome of neglect prevails. Fourth, we suggest some initiatives to awaken the citizenry from its collective sleepwalking.

**A sample of sources of concern**

Whether the governance failures are ascribable to *malignant narcissism* or to some *politics of guilt*, or to a nexus of other forces, there is no doubt that Canada is failing to acknowledge crucial problems, and to respond effectively and creatively to a number of basic challenges. Our intent is not to produce an exhaustive catalogue of all such unmet challenges, but to underline a few critical situations commonly regarded as likely to become disastrous, and about which failure to respond is flagrant.

The first unmet challenge concerns our abysmal performance on the productivity and innovation front. Studies by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards and the Conference Board of Canada have shown that while productivity growth allowed the standard of living of Canadians to double every 18 years from 1947 to 1973, it is now growing four times more slowly, and, as a result, the standard of living is likely to double only every 70 years. As for innovation, since the 1980s, Canada is rated D by the Conference Board, and ranks 14\(^{th}\) out of the 17 industrialized countries examined by the Board\(^3\). Failing to recognize the dramatic impact that these congenital weaknesses in the Canadian socio-economy are bound to have on the future welfare of Canadians, and to take action to deal effectively with them, is evidence of criminal negligence.

A second unmet challenge has to do with the refusal to face the impending crisis facing our health care and retirement pension systems. The cognitive dissonance of the citizenry and the carelessness and lack of courage of governments in responding to it by implementing any of the repairs suggested by innumerable

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\(^2\) This lethargy translates into cognitive dissonance and to the conclusion that no immediate action is required. The only groups that have vehemently denounced this willful blindness (and the brainwashing efforts to engineer and to rationalize it) are quickly demonized, especially when they expose such dysfunctions as the result of some *malignant narcissism* – Tammy Bruce 2004. *The Death of Right and Wrong*. New York: Three Rivers Press – or *some politics of guilt* – Paul Edward Gottfried 2002. *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. Dysfunction is in any case generally denied.

expert panels, make it hardly surprising that Canadians continue to praise the extraordinary superiority of their systems at the very moment that these systems are giving clear signs of imminent collapse\(^4\).

A third issue of concern is the failure to contain the flow of immigration into Canada within the bounds defined by the country’s absorptive capacity – economic, financial, social – and to ensure that the waves of new arrivals do not erode the common public culture. In this case – as in many others – it may not be simple negligence but rather deliberate willful deception by some politicians and the technocracy, with the complicity of the intelligentsia and the media. This deception has been ascribed by some observers to some presumed collective guilt about the past, and some duty to atone for such a past. It has led to technocratic and media efforts “to pathologize” critical attitudes and views by placing them outside of public discussion\(^5\). These groups can legitimately be accused of the effective brainwashing of the citizenry about the putative benefits of mass immigration, and of irresponsibly propagandizing a multiculturalist ideology designed to blindside an intimidated populace, one that is afraid to be accused of nativism if they object to policies that are bound to dramatically transform the fabric of Canadian society. Given the fragile nature of the common public culture in a liberal democracy like Canada, the damages perpetrated by such propaganda, since the 1990s, have been significant. These potential negative impacts have not only been denied, but those who have brought forth signals of distress have been defamed\(^6\).

A fourth unmet challenge concerns the erosion of Canadian citizenship, and the increasing de facto silent balkanization of the country. The notion of citizenship has become so thin that it seems to have been reduced to a bouquet of entitlements. This has been engineered by the courts as a result of Charter cases, and has led to what Richard Gwyn called the “unbearable lightness of being Canadian”. This, together with the Canadian multiculturalism policy, has brought about a degeneration of the country into a form of multitribalism, along with the judicialization of intercultural interaction. The growing internecine strife among provinces, and the loss of commitment to doing great things together – still a reference in the recent past\(^7\) – are side effects of this erosion of citizenship that is weakening Canada’s social fabric.

These problems are not uniquely Canadian in their nature, but they are uniquely Canadian in the extent to which they are gleefully ignored. Indeed, the crux of our concern here is that Canadian governance appears to be blind to these sorts of problems, and incapable of considering that they call for urgent action – despite the fact that a significant portion of the most intellectually alert Canadians envisages that, if unchecked, many of these already detectable trends can lead only to catastrophes.

The central malaise, therefore, is not that these challenges exist and are acute, but that, in the case of Canada, there is an extraordinary capacity to deny their existence, and an extraordinary unwillingness to do anything about them.

**Why such cognitive-dissonance-cum-inertia?**

This is not a general explanation of the sort of inertia that one observes around the democratic world in modern times, in the face of the slow erosion of some foundational pillars. It is too early to even tentatively suggest such grand schemes. Our intent here is more modest: trying to identify the sources of such blindness and inertia in Canada. We suggest that it is ascribable to a process of degradation of the

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\(^6\) Gilles Paquet 2012. *Moderato Cantabile – Toward Principled Governance for Canada’s Immigration Regime*. Ottawa: Invenire. It is interesting to note the same obstinate refusal to acknowledge the same sort of problem by politicians and intellectuals in Sweden in the face of increasing tensions (Margaret Wente 2013. “Sweden’s Immigration Consensus is in Peril” *The Globe & Mail*, June 1).

common public culture, as a result of the nexus of three families of forces: the installation of a culture of entitlement, the demise of critical thinking, and a certain cult of atonement.

**Culture of entitlement**

In a world of surprises, accelerated change, and necessary adaptation to constantly changing circumstances, the quest for stability and certainty may be illusory, but it is nevertheless a constant human aspiration. Over time, the natural preference for not having one’s life disturbed has come to be regarded as a widely-shared reasonable priority. This quest for stability has induced groups of citizens (with the complicity of governments which are always seeking ways to please voters) to allow these preferences for certainty to be transubstantiated into some version of human rights, and those rights to be translated in turn into the entitlements of citizens to have protection provided by their governments against undesirable circumstances.

The post-World-War II (with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) egalitarian doctrine argued that any citizen *qua* citizen is as meritorious and deserving as the next citizen, and this has made it possible for the view to emerge that any form of differential outcome is odious. Indeed, in radical circles, it has been argued that if one citizen cannot have access to a service, others should not have it either – in the name of equality of outcome. This means that entitlements have grown exponentially, and have come to be not just related to basic needs, but also, and most vociferously, to *positional goods*:

Once preferences have been re-labeled as rights and entitlements, they quickly crystallize into a set of guarantees that come to be regarded as having been earned (*des acquis*), and these preferences are expected to be provided by the state in perpetuity. Moreover, any existing platform of *acquis* in good currency at any one time quickly becomes the legitimate basis from which it can be expected that additional protections may be added in due time – down the wish list of the United Nations 1947 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and more. This sort of ‘progressive’ ratcheting up has acquired a certain sanctimonious merit, through systematic celebration as a fundamental and unchallengeable reference, so that any attempt to renegotiate previous arrangements in the light of changing circumstances, or of the discovery of unintended toxic consequences (financial or behavioral), has come to be regarded as *de facto* unacceptable, whatever the reasons invoked.

The effect of some fifty years of such cumulative entitlements – what Nicholas Eberstadt has referred to as an "entitlement epidemic" – has been an exponential increase in state transfers to individuals, a growing dependency of citizens on such transfers, and the parallel growth of a culture of entitlement that would appear to make this growth likely to continue unabated. Toxic effects can be expected: on governments, for which this might become unaffordable; but also on the citizens themselves – for whom such arrangements may generate malefïts in the form of learned dependency and helplessness, or an erosion of their burden of office as citizens, or even an erosion of their moral character and sense of responsibility as members of a liberal democracy.

Indeed, according to some observers, moral agency has already been undermined, as governments have started to take over tasks that individuals used to undertake themselves. The very idea of *vulnerability*

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8 This section draws freely on an argument presented in a section of the paper by Gilles Paquet “The Governance of Equability” published in this issue
“has become such a cannibal that it now covers not only the victims of misfortune or delinquency but even the delinquents themselves”\textsuperscript{11}.

\textit{The demise of critical thinking}

One of the unintended consequences of this entitlement epidemic, at least in part, has been the demise of critical thinking. As individuals developed a bloated notion of what they were entitled to, many of the arrangements that underpinned such an edifice became sacred cows. They were “placed outside public discussion” (Gottfried), and immunized from any criticism as part of ‘progressive’ arrangements: i.e., arrangements not necessarily rationally defensible on social, economic or political grounds, but regarded as legitimized by the hegemonic reference to compassion, and therefore not to be questioned except perhaps by the odd counter-progressive – a condemnation without appeal as intellectually and morally deficient.

The notion ‘progressive’ has now permeated the conventional wisdom, and immunized a whole range of policies and arrangements from any meaningful scrutiny. This has resulted in the exclusion of critical thinking from vast territories of public affairs.

When whole portions of human activity are out of bounds for critical thinking, ideologies run amok, and moral relativism becomes the new creed. Every judgment is made on the basis of ideology, and everything is as good as anything else depending on the ideology invoked. No order of precedence is regarded as defensible, and any ordering at all is defined as contingent and illegitimate\textsuperscript{12}. This new frame of mind has been vigorously propounded under all sorts of labels (post-modernism being the most celebrated), and any standard or ordering has come to be regarded as not more legitimate or worthy than any other.

Sometimes, there are problems generated by the failures to apply critical thinking to human affairs. What do critical thinkers do? – They raise vital questions, formulate them clearly, gather relevant information and interpret it effectively, come to well-reasoned conclusions and decisions, test them on relevant criteria, think open-mindedly about alternative perspectives, assess their assumptions and consequences, and communicate effectively with others in coming to solutions.

More succinctly, critical thinking is “reasonable, reflective, responsible, and skillful thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do”\textsuperscript{13}. More analytically, critical thinking combines – \textit{thinking skills} (analyzing, interpreting, explaining, evaluating, recognizing logical fallacies), \textit{a skeptic’s worldview} (recognizing that things are not always entirely what they seem), and \textit{intellectual due process} (more integrity, humility, tolerance of uncertainty, and raw courage than most of us find easy to summon)\textsuperscript{14}.

\textsuperscript{12} This decline in critical thinking has been documented in the public sector (Ruth Hubbard and Gilles Paquet 2010. \textit{The Black Hole of Public Administration}. Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press, 132ff.
\textsuperscript{13} S.D. Schafersman, 1991. An Introduction to Critical Thinking. \url{www.creeinquiry.com/critical-thinking.html} p.3
\textsuperscript{14} H. Gabennesch 2006. “Critical Thinking. What is it good for? (In fact, what is it?) \textit{Skeptical Inquirer}, 30 (2) 36-41.
As a result of generalized entitlements, and the deliquescence of all critical perspectives and reference points as contingent, the whole notion of critically appraising anything as better or more valuable than something else was put into question. Given that opposition to anything was deemed simply the result of adopting a different ideology or perspective, presumed to be superior to the one in good currency, it was summarily regarded as ill-founded and pretentious. It is hardly surprising, under such circumstances, if critical thinkers felt that they entered the fray at their peril. Consequently, all sorts of behavioral perversions were allowed to emerge and survive.

*Cult of atonement*

The sense that any ordering or hierarchization is illegitimate, and therefore the result of operations that are indefensible, has injected a sense of apprehended guilt in those tempted to call a spade a spade. Indeed, this sentiment – that is deep-rooted in our religious background, according to Gottfried – was distorted and was exploited by the “righteous few” who “made a show of good conscience by apologizing for collective sins – and by exhorting the state to enact compulsory penance”. Consequently, a self-censorship emerged that has tended to emasculate public discourse, action, and interaction. Indeed, apprehended denunciation, and the consciousness of having to expiate sins of critical thinking have begun to inhabit the public mind. This has translated into behavioral modification of the most untoward sort: a sanitization of language, a refusal to confront even the worst sophistry and deception, and a sheepish acceptance of even the most unreasonable accommodation in the name of tolerance – which is often a code word for the expiation for imagined sin.

(1) **Political correctness**

This guilt at asserting any form of ordering or at suggesting any assessment of limitations and flaws in existing arrangements, or at pointing out the sources and causes of such flaws, has led to the language being purged of anything that might be regarded as sharp or stark statements about certain issues. Adverbs were mobilized to attenuate any statement to the point of making it trite and vacuous. Civility, which is the primary virtue enabling conversation and dialogue, was perverted to the point where it became a systematic avoidance of any critical view, and where all negative words were somewhat liquefied, so as to become meaningless. The first victim of this erosion of language was free speech, and the banishment of contrarian views. The magic of dialogue was killed, and social learning was disempowered.

(2) **Failure to confront**

Not only was language enfeebled, but action was neutered as well. Even the outrageous abuses of the rules of *vivre-ensemble* remain unchallenged. Challenges to the authority of the criminal code by sharia promoters were narrowly escaped by Premier McGuinty’s intervention; but on the other hand, there is the abject submission of Gatineau City Council – it withdrew a manual to help newcomers to better adjust to the Canadian ways (prepared by the foreign-born city council member, Mireille Apollon, in consultation with provincial officials); this was done on the sole basis of the protest of one immigrant. How can we defend our ways of vivre-ensemble if no view can be regarded as more deserving than any other in our morally relativist world.

This, as might be expected, has led to ever more egregious abuses by groups who found that their very marginality would suffice to immunize them from sanction. Such hyper-tolerance has become incorporated in practices, and practices in rules. Over time, the fuss generated by any confrontation has become sufficient to deter confrontation, however serious the matter in question.

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15 Paul Edward Gottfried 2002. *op.cit. 95*
(3) Unreasonable accommodation

Perhaps even worse, because of the systematic failure to confront, there has been a silent re-alignment of the rules of *vivre-ensemble* in good currency to accommodate the most unreasonable requests. Traditions rooted in centuries of *vivre-ensemble* were blithely offered up as contingent nuisances to be casually sacrificed in order not to offend one minority or another. This has led to a tyranny of the minorities: servile accommodation to the unreasonable wishes and preferences of marginal groups for the sole purpose of avoiding the confrontation that would bring with it automatic odium.

This is not the place for a litany of illustrations of this cascade of mechanisms in action, but some particularly vivid examples might be useful: the tolerance of polygamy in Bountiful, BC; the schools for black only in Toronto; the refusal to monitor the true presence in Canada of persons with permanent resident requirements during their period of qualification for citizenship; etc.

A perfect quiet cultural capitulation

The Canadian common public culture is a nebula. It is a compounding of the basic principles and essential beliefs that underpin the conventions and moral contracts that organize our *vivre-ensemble*. These principles and beliefs have developed over time, and represent the outcome of an evolutionary process blending both those factors inherited from our very humanity, as well as some more idiosyncratic features attached to our own organizational culture.

What made the Canadian case special is that Canadians, like many other societies, were not only swayed by the gospel of moral relativism, but that they have come to be further swayed, so to speak, by propaganda: sufficiently to come to believe that not only is there no ranking of values, but also – and this is a quantum leap – no ranking of cultures either. Officials would even state that Canada has no idiosyncratic ways of *vivre-ensemble*, no Canadian identity, “no national culture” of its own, and that newcomers could therefore bring their own culture with them when migrating to Canada.

As a result, Canadians have been unwittingly led to sleepwalk into an erosion of their own evolving common public culture. Some of the intelligentsia, some political officials, and some of the media led the parade, and staunchly defended this equality of all cultures: that none could be superior to any other. This led naturally to the host society indiscriminately accommodating to the cultures of newcomers. Even asking if there might not be limits to such accommodation – if, perhaps, elements of the host society’s common public culture (e.g., gender equality) might legitimately be declared to be non-negotiable – has proved to be a controversial proposition.

It is interesting to see how the mechanisms mentioned in the last section, working in tandem, have generated a dramatic storm that has left Canada in a precarious position. The culture of entitlements has developed in Canada in a particular way – especially in the context of the 1982 Charter of Rights, which sidestepped any reference to responsibilities and duties; which protected any newcomer entering Canada, legally or illegally; which was the subject of much judicial activism by the Supreme Court over the first decade of its life.

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17 This astounding statement was made by Sheila Finestone (the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism in the federal government of Canada) in 1995 (quoted in Richard Gwyn 1995. *Nationalism Without Walls – The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, p. 182).
The full force of the multicultural ideology, for instance,

- as strengthened by Article 27 of the Charter committing Canada to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians), and
- the political insouciance that greeted the Singh decision by the Supreme Court – the Canadian government did not dare to use the notwithstanding clause when the Supreme Court of Canada (by a three-to-three decision, i.e., one in which the Chief Justice had to cast the deciding vote) ruled in 1985 that a foreigner putting one foot on Canadian soil (legally or not) thereby acquired all the rights and privileges of Canadian citizens, except the right to vote (as per article 7 of the Charter,

can only be ascribed to the Canadian ethos having evolved rapidly and dramatically in real time under the noxious influences of the culture and politics of guilt.

The post-Charter decade gave rise to a frenzy of rights. During that period, a Charter that had been put in place to protect the citizen from the State was transformed by identity groups into an instrument to create entitlements of all sorts. During the same period, the Supreme Court was not satisfied to interpret the law. It used the Charter to rewrite the law.

Through a series of decisions, reviewed by Gwyn,

- the Supreme Court ensured that article 15(2) of the Charter (about group rights) came to take precedence over article 15(1) that guaranteed individual rights;
- it dramatically extended the ambit of what might legitimately be regarded as a basis for Charter appeal by “disadvantaged groups”, through an extraordinary broadening of the definition of “disadvantaged group”, and a significant extension of the grounds for complaint to include anything that might connote “chilly climate” or “hostile environment” – whatever these words might mean;
- moreover, the courts in general came to accept as legitimate in their proceedings the notion of “cultural defence”, based on self-proclaimed beliefs. In a world where most of the population might be able to claim being part of a “disadvantaged group”, as it became so loosely defined, cultural defence based on self-proclaimed cultural beliefs takes the law into a quagmire 18.

It is easy to see how, in the new post-Charter era, a culture of entitlements could flourish, identity politics could thrive, and diversity came to be politicized. In this context, it became politically incorrect to criticize the new massive and indiscriminate immigration policy of both Liberal and Conservative governments. Indeed, such a regime was promoted as legitimate, acceptable, and even honourable and advantageous – a model for the rest of the world.

That new ethos helps to explain the reversal of Canadian views about immigration (as captured in the polls) : from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, two thirds of the population felt generally that there might be too much immigration, but some sixty percent disagreed with this proposition in the following decade. Such a phenomenal reversal of perspectives (despite the fact that this was a period in which problems with integration were increasing and becoming common knowledge) deserves more attention than it has received. It most certainly revealed a high degree of false consciousness, a significant gap between the

18 Richard Gwyn, op.cit. Part III passim. On January 13, 1994, a Canadian county court judge (Raymonde Verreault) could in all seriousness impose on January 13, 1994, a reduced sentence on a man who had sexually assaulted his 11-year old stepdaughter over a two-year period, because he had only sodomized her, thereby (in the words of the judge) “preserving her virginity which seems to be a very important value in their (Islamic) religion” (p.197).
underlying socio-economic realities and the representations concatenated by the diversity/multiculturalism ideology that had been permeating the public consciousness over the preceding decade or so. Indeed, the new ideology had become the new Canada brand, able to filter out any inconvenient truth.\footnote{According to Paul Edward Gottfried (\textit{op.cit.} passim 8-14), much of it has been the result of the work of the therapeutic state reconstructing the consciousness. This would explain the puzzling shift of opinion over a relatively short time that was discussed extensively in Gilles Paquet 2012. \textit{Moderato Cantabile}...All the mechanisms mentioned in the last section might have worked more explosively in the context of the post-Charter ebullition in Canada.}

It was not until the second half of the first decade of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century that expressions of concern began to be heard again, as the newcomers’ increasing difficulties with integration, and the problems of reasonable and unreasonable accommodation demanded by some groups of newcomers, began to reveal a growing apprehension about the impact of the large inflow of immigrants, not only on the socio-economy, but also on the common public culture. However, even over the last few years, these concerns have been expressed only \textit{sotto voce} and anonymously in polls, because they remained unwelcome views in public fora. Serious cost studies are still savaged as nativist and xenophobic propaganda, and concerns about the impact of excessively large cohorts of newcomers on the common public culture are routinely squelched.

Through all those years, until recently, critical evaluations of the new immigration policy were met with scorn by the governments of the day, the intelligentsia, and the media, while the choir of immigration lawyers and multiculturalism lobbyists messages about such critical evaluations being racist and nativist were widely publicized. Indeed, this was usually supplemented in the media by an ‘alternative explanation’ for the new immigrants’ increasing difficulties in smoothly integrating into the Canadian socio-economy. It was supposedly entirely due to Canada being a “systemically racist” society – according to a proclamation by Stephen Lewis in his 1992 Report on Racism to the Premier of Ontario. Atonement and self-flagellation had reached new heights.

This is only one area where the cascade of mechanisms was played out; they have also worked themselves into our collective life in many others. At the core of the threat to the common public culture is our willful blindness to its erosion, and to the long-term impact of defective arrangements, as well as the inertia of the governance apparatus – unwillingness and incapacity to react and to repair these defects in the face of such challenges.

**What to do?**

It should be clear that some of these threats have come from the outside (as we have hinted at above), but most of them have come from the inside: from a culture of contentment and a sense of guilt.

This syndrome, which has not yet been blessed with a name, is responsible for both our willful blindness, and our inertia in the face of irreversible slippages. Caught within the web of these various forces, no simple fix or gimmick will elicit a way out. What is required is a revolution of the mind, a different perspective, and a refurbished governance.

What appears to be missing is, perspective-wise, a ‘crane’ which sends down a hook to lift the observer into a position where the perspective is broadened to take into account interactions, mind frames and power interfaces, lengthened to extend the time horizon, and elevated to transcend the contingent aspects of the citizens’ daily lives. What is also missing is a governance apparatus that provides the motivation to deal with the challenges revealed by the view from the crane.
On the first front, it might be worth considering again a suggestion that has been floating about for almost fifty years: the creation of a Committee on The Long Run in the Senate of Canada²⁰ that would ensure a fair dialogue about matters where predictable trends point to irreversibilities. It would generate the sort of mobilization of informed stakeholders that is necessary for such issues to be fully aired, described, and discussed, and for inquiries into effective wayfinding to be put into effect promptly.

In many issue domains, Senate committees have played that key role in Canada in the past. In earlier times, the reflective work of the Senate committees has often been translated into action rather quickly when the case could be made that the matter was urgent. The recommendations of the Senate Committee on Aging of 1964 were in the Speech from the Throne in 1966. One cannot expect such a rapid connection between findings, recommendations, and action these days, since problems are often immensely more complex and unlikely to be tackled with one instrument. Yet even the ill-fated experiences of the visionary Senate Committee on Science Policy, piloted by Senator Maurice Lamontagne in the 1970s, or of the excellent work on health care by Senator Michael Kirby, have shown that these reports have prepared the ground in invaluable ways for the responses to come. In the case of such wicked problems, the transmission process from excellent research and recommendations to action can be daunting, if not completely intractable. An effective response cannot rest only on the sole power of good intellectual work and carefully crafted recommendations. What is needed, in addition, is an effective inquiring systems designed to elicit experimentally the requisite social learning that will bring forth effective coordination, when power, resources and information are widely distributed among many hands and heads.

On this second front – the means to inquire fruitfully, and the motivation to deal with the challenges revealed by the view from the crane – we can no longer depend on the work of a single champion, as, for instance, when Senator Croll campaigned across the country, during the 1964-66 period, trying to persuade Canadians that the 1964 report of the Senate Committee on Aging had to be acted on swiftly. There will have to be some concerted action to carry the conclusions of the Committee on the Long Run to the range of social actors in the governance process most likely to ensure that appropriate action is indeed implemented.

This cannot be done without the help of a roundtable of relevant stakeholders being created to ensure that the process of mobilization and implementation is deployed with the huge arsenal of modern communications technology and social networks, so that the creative ideas put forward by the Committee on The Long Run are given a full national airing, and are allowed to be neither ignored nor discarded lightly and irresponsibly. This would mobilize the creative work and imagination of the Senate as animateur.

There have been many complex thorny issues that have been handed to special committees or commissions in the past, with the result that Canadian life has been changed: some senate committees, some royal commissions, some expert panels of the Royal Society of Canada, some investigative

committes at the provincial level, etc. Some of those experiments have fizzled out or failed because of their amateurism or their ideological tainting, but many have provided extraordinary experiments in problem redefinition and have changed the Canadian scene, even where some refused to issue a programmatic final report – e.g., the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism – preferring to allow the better informed Canadians, as a result of the Royal Commission’s work, to distil their own responses at their own pace within the corridor of possible futures that had been mapped.

This is a task that would fit the Senate of Canada perfectly. It would provide it with a value-adding mission in the Canadian institutional fabric, and it would force the process of selecting senators to take some distance from the whimsicality that has generated the quilt-like nature of the current institution. There is an elite of senators that can play this role now, and this portion could be improved upon once it is known that those appointed will be asked to tackle the most difficult problems facing this country. We could then anticipate that no one called on to serve would be tempted to decline.

A double set of benchmarks would guide the processes both of exploration and implementation, sketched above. They are a balancing of

- the imperatives of the cardinal virtues that carry with them the wisdom of the ages (temperantia – an awareness of the sense of limits; fortitudo – taking into account context and long term; justitia – a sense of what is good; and prudentia – what is practical and reasonable) and of
- the basic principles (representative democracy, rule of law, etc.) and essential beliefs (freedom of choice, equality of men and women, equality of opportunity, etc.) defining the common public culture.

One would expect that the implementation phase would build on an inquiring system. It would seek to find ways to define the corridor of governance arrangements likely to ensure the development of the mix of incentives and moral contracts that are capable of generating both some detoxification of flawed arrangements, and some design of alternative social learning processes, promising more value adding (in the broadest sense of the term), innovation, and progress.

Despite its fundamental optimism, such an approach is not utopian.

**Conclusion**

What could kickstart such a process?

An eminent economic historian, Charles Kindleberger, has suggested that such transformations in socio-economies are so difficult that they are usually observed only in extraordinary circumstances, like wars or defeats that destroy the institutional fabric and force socio-economies to rebuild anew. The challenge would be nothing less than discovering or engineering the moral equivalent of a war, or the sociological equivalent of a defeat, in order to get an arterio-sclerotic socio-economy to rejuvenate itself\(^\text{21}\). These are very daunting prerequisites.

Less taxing perhaps is the suggestion of Anthony Appiah, who has argued that most moral revolutions, like the abolition of slavery or the end of dueling – two examples of most destructive governance arrangements – have been triggered by a change in the code of honor\(^\text{22}\), in the way the appreciation system was shaped, and the way in which the notion of what is honorable was defined.

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It is possible that one of the side-effects of the work of a Committee on The Long Run will be to make Canadians aware of their responsibility for their grandchildren, and to shame them into greater awareness of how dishonorable it is to neglect their fate. Much of the concern about environmental issues has already come to life in that manner. If citizens can be shamed into not asking for plastic bags at their grocery store, for environment’s sake, they might be mobilized into pressing for action to counter certain potential irreversibilities if they are presented and understood as imperiling one’s grandchildren. Inaction then becomes a dishonorable choice.

A bit of irony might also be useful. Canadian citizens might be ironically reminded that if we were searching for a rallying call or a mock national anthem for Canadians in 2013 – given the present level of contentment and inertia – “tout va très bien, madame la marquise” might be a suitable fit. It is the title of a 1935 song by Paul Misraki that marvelously captures a certain willful blindness in the face of catastrophe. It is the phone conversation between an aristocratic lady who is out of town, with her valet who is at home in her castle. The valet keeps telling her everything is alright, except for a sequence of bad news that he communicates to her seriatim (from the death of her horse to the suicide of her husband). Each time, in between each new and more disastrous announcement, the chorus reiterates in a more and more absurd way …mais à part ça, madame la marquise, tout va très bien, tout va très bien.

But the real starting point is the belief that we can develop such initiatives, that we can bring back into public discussion those attitudes, views, arrangements that used to be regarded as taboo topics. Therefore, we take consolation from independent thought crawling out of the blasted landscape (to quote a headline of the National Post of June 4th 2013), and topics like supply management, road tolls, the Rand formula, native property ownership, carbon tax, even abortion… begin forcing themselves into the public square and emerging from the most varied Canadian political corners23. Or when we read, on June 5th, about John Baird’s “dignity agenda” – defined by a former diplomat as an idealistic notion that just might beworth pursuing on the international scene24. All this in the short space of two days! Readers might then understand why yesterday we might have been ready to conclude this paper by saying that we were not too hopeful, but that we had hope, providing we could unlock some of the mental prisons we had unearthed.

Yet as if reality had decided to maul us, a headline on the front page of the Globe & Mail today brought back, with a vengeance, our unique Canadian toxic capacity to allow malignant narcissism to cripple our ways in the form of the unilateral announcement by the French service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) – Radio-Canada – a public broadcaster in the French language, richly funded by the federal government of Canada, that it would erase any reference to Canada in its new public face25. Such a decision should contribute in our own remarkable and toxic Canadian way to increasing yet again the “unbearable lightness of being Canadian”, and constitute an explicit betrayal of the federal organization’s mission in forging Canadian unity in diversity through better pan-Canadian communication. It remains to be seen, as this paper goes to press, whether the response to this petty ignominy or act of sabotage will be an abject silence, or the drawing of a line in the sand by Canadians who still value their nationality, and who pay for this Canadian service – reminding the disloyal satraps responsible for this discourteous act of provocation that Canadian patience has limits, and that they have now been transgressed.

24 Colin Robertson 2013. “John Baird’s “dignity agenda” – an idealistic notion that just might work” Communiqué of the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, June 5.