



THE AGE OF RAGE

2023 Environmental Scan

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“We are projects of collective self-creation. What if we approached human history that way? What if we treat people, from the beginning, as imaginative, intelligent, playful creatures who deserve to be understood as such? What if, instead of telling a story about how our species fell from some idyllic state of equality, we ask how we came to be trapped in such tight conceptual shackles that we can no longer even imagine the possibility of reinventing ourselves?”¹

David Graeber, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2022)



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“Unhelpful systems and structures get perpetuated when we only have the energy for tweaks and small improvements... If our leaders are so caught up in the work that they can't reflect, dream, and hope for a better world, then we're gambling our capacity to bring about the scale of change we need now.”²

Sophia Parker, CEO,
Joseph Rowntree
Foundation

01 Introduction

The year 2023 started much as 2022 did; Quite literally, with a bang. In fact, it was a volley of bangs, as Russia escalated its war on Ukraine, begun in 2014 with the occupation of Crimea, into a full-scale invasion. The incursion displaced 14 million Ukrainians, killed over 7,000 civilians and over 35,000 Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, united a previously divided West, tested the resolve of NATO, and ushered in the most acute nuclear threat since the Cuban Missile Crisis, six decades ago. Even without entering the Ukraine conflict into the ledger, worldwide military spending has reached an all-time high of over \$2 trillion.³ What we might have previously labeled “black swan” events are becoming the new plausible norm. The Doomsday Clock is now set to to 90 seconds to midnight⁴ – the closest it has ever been set – five months after UN Secretary General António Guterres warned about being ‘one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation’.⁵ Chilling stuff. And this is before adding the leap forward in artificial intelligence (AI), itself a veritable bisque of promise, possibility, and existential peril.

This dance on the doorstep of Armageddon begs a rather obvious yet surprisingly elusive question: Why have we come to build and embrace this form of civilization? A civilization that furnishes the real possibility of nuclear conflict, but is also de-humanizing in countless other respects: A civilization in which full time wage earners must access food charity in order to eat⁶; in which a home is a speculative commodity for some, but far out of reach for others; in which fast fashion, planned obsolescence and engineered consumer preferences trump quality production in the service of quality living; in which caregivers are among the most poorly compensated for their labour while hedge fund traders are among the most handsomely paid; in which rich countries hoard life-saving vaccines beyond their expiry dates while people's lives in the global south are worth less than the intellectual property of big pharma... All of these signals and more indicate not just flawed economic priorities, but a broken civilization.

Last year's Environmental Scan, cheekily titled *Sh*it's Getting Real*, framed the start of 2022 as follows:

“We are living through one of those rare periods that come along perhaps once every five or six decades, where a profound and permanent readjustment is taking place. What complex systems theorists call a ‘phase transition.’ All kinds of institutions, sectors, conventions, and power relationships are being upended. It is a period of immense anxiety for those who fear the future, and dizzying excitement for those eager to jettison the past.”⁷

A year later, not surprisingly, this still applies. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley remarked in her science fiction masterpiece *Frankenstein*, “nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change.” But we can hope to ride the waves of change, hoping and praying to stay afloat, or we can look beneath the surface, to glean deeper insight.

Designing for Life in a Toxic Culture

As renowned Canadian addictions expert and author Dr. Gabor Maté notes in his latest book *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (2022), co-written with his son Daniel, our current society is built upon systems that unwittingly foster high rates of chronic and mental illness.⁸ Inequality, as one example they discuss, creates well-documented stresses on people – stresses that are inevitable in a society that values or abuses people according to their level of economic achievement.⁹

As last year's Scan described in some detail, we now have unprecedented – and profoundly destabilizing – levels of global wealth inequality. According to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index¹⁰, 131 billionaires more than doubled their net worth during the pandemic, while 97 million additional people were pushed into poverty, according to the World Bank¹¹. Another 47 million could be pushed into poverty just based on Ukraine production and distribution losses, according to the World Food Programme.¹² Other sections of this year's Scan dig into the phenomena of biodiversity loss, eco-anxiety, and climate grief as other symptoms of a sub-optimal culture. But, as Maté observes, “no human system is meant to be eternal, and no human system ever has been.”¹³ Indeed, the exponential rise in futures thinking (in business schools, and among governments, companies, and NGOs) suggests that a familiarity with the past, and a historiographical curiosity about broad trends and patterns in human societies (though not always popular among historians themselves) should accompany reflection and speculation at the deepest cultural and civilizational levels.¹⁴

What might such speculation entail? What cultural or civilizational form, for example, might have a substantially lower catastrophic risk exposure? One that maintains the attributes we love – long life expectancy, better food security, low levels of violence, greatly expanded recognition of human rights and dignities – yet does not degrade the planet beyond liveability, or rely on mass consumption to keep it afloat.¹⁵ One that is not driven by pathologies of accumulating wealth and power at any cost.

It is easy to dismiss such goals as utopian. But we do have the freedom and capacity, even if we have trouble recognizing and seizing it, to create such a future. This is exactly what new cross-sectoral initiatives like *Our Future Life*, “a global future-positive movement to create a better world in which all humanity can thrive,”¹⁶, the RSA's *Design for Life* project¹⁷, or the Skoll Centre's *Movements of Movements* initiative¹⁸, have been formed to envision, among many others.

A New Future History

As anthropologist David Graeber and archeologist David Wenlow argue in their monumental examination of world pre-history – *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) – there was never an idealized state of society prior to some epochal fall from grace. Human societies have for thousands of years experimented with various civilizational designs:¹⁹ Some hierarchical and exploitative, others more egalitarian and/or stewardship-focused. Some where warrior culture is exalted, others where the killing of not just humans but other animals is viewed as taboo. Virtually all cultures have degraded their environments, but at vastly different rates, with vastly different stewardship horizons.²⁰ But despite this diversity and non-linearity, we have a dominant storytelling pattern that has led us to believe – as Graeber and Wenlow put it – “that ‘civilization’ and ‘complexity’ always come at the price of human freedoms; that participatory democracy is natural in small groups but cannot possibly scale up to anything like a city or a nation state.” We have also let the European enlightenment serve as a proxy for progress when in many respects that same enlightenment subdued cultures, practices, peoples, and freedom itself. A section later in this scan, for example, explores how



non-binary manifestations of gender and sexuality are partially a resurgence of pre-contact “two-spirit” and related concepts. Graeber and Wenlow’s analysis strips away modernist ideas of inevitable linear progress, and instead encourages us to grasp – at a deep level – that humans have the freedom to reimagine and reconstruct one’s society in a different and customizable form.

What might we then imagine for the future? What practices and features define our current form of civilization, for good or ill? What motivates, what matters, and what results from our cultural form as it is currently (both positive and negative)? The anthropologist and cyberneticist Genevieve Bell sees some parallels to the creation of the first school of engineering – the Ecole Polytechnique – in France in 1794, on the heels of the French Revolution.²¹ For those “engineers” (a brand-new profession at the time), the question was how to build a world without reference to kingly authority or divine right. For us, the question might be something like “How might we build a world without reference to the imperative to ever-enrich shareholders?” or “...without relying on charity and alms to address positive social impact?”

On the one hand, our current age has witnessed extraordinary gains in knowledge and massively expanded empathy, alongside large long-term declines in violence and parochial ignorance.²² Some sections of this scan highlight the encouraging leaps we have made with respect to literacy and education, inclusivity based on gender and sexuality, and enhanced accessibility and universal design. On the other hand, we are hemorrhaging biodiversity (equivalent to a mass extinction event), linguistic diversity (losing one language every 40 days, on average²³), cultural diversity (cleaving to a consumer-driven monoculture), and are flirting with the collapse of planetary ecosystems. The latter part of the ledger is the failure point – what Thomas Homer Dixon calls the *global polycrisis*²⁴ – leading eventually, without significant course-correction, to the collapse of societies and economies.



Those who have studied the rise and fall of previous civilizations discovered that they have all cratered mainly because of reaching environmental carrying capacity limits.²⁵ This implies that we need to take our foot off the growth accelerator, which is not only testing those carrying capacity limits, but is profoundly asymmetrical in how the fruits of such growth are realized. But the system we have does not permit us to think in this way - we really do not know how to shift to a low-growth, low-consumption economy.²⁶ And yet, that is what the future demands and requires. At the same time, we need to shift how resources are *distributed*; Those civilizations in human history that were more resilient to catastrophic shocks had a much smaller gap between the elites and the broader population.²⁷

A Connected Civilization

One might conclude that the path forward might be some form of local-centric, neo-agrarian vision for humanity. While these may be features of a future societal norm - look at the rise of vertical urban farming, for example - and despite the musing at the end of this Scan about the rise of the cities as more powerful economic, political, and even constitutional actors, globalization is also here to stay. Canada has never been more globally connected (with a new annual immigration target of 500,000 people, a sharp rise in temporary foreign workers; steady rise in international students; and many diasporic ties to current global events, well beyond Ukraine). A civilization that is at once incredibly well connected, informed, and intellectually ever-expanding is not inherently in conflict with one that is sustainable and regenerative. Thus, we hear of concepts like 'glocalism' and 'cosmo-localism' with increasing frequency.

A connected civilization will also have greater capacity to link not just between people, but between concepts, ideas, disparate disciplines, and indeed, social challenges. For example, think of the many issues tied to mental health. Loneliness is one, which leads in turn to thinking about social isolation, anomie, and atomization, then in turn to consumer capitalism, then envy and inferiority tied to inequality, then back to mental health, then body image - social media - algorithmic engagement - engagement-driven advertising - consumption - carbon emissions - climate change - ecogrief - and back again to mental health.

There are myriad connections linking the topics in this scan. In addition to the usual scan components - political, economic, philanthropic, technological, climate, this annual scan takes a deeper dive into a small number of niche areas, where topics converge and collide: Human rights and nature; financialization and affordable housing; democracy and cities; and - yes, of course - ecological collapse and mental health. Other issues highlighted in this year's scan, not covered in previous scans, include trend updates on disability, literacy, gender, and the phenomenon of *rage farming*.

The complexity and interconnectedness of systems is itself frightening and daunting for many. This is one of the reasons we need to invite and include Indigenous ways of knowing, including in our systems of learning, at every level. Our asystemic thinking is getting us into existential trouble. We believe technology will save us, or a great leader who stands up to Ottawa, or better pipelines to markets, or a carbon tax, or a basic income... But the problem is so much deeper. For example, we cannot get lower carbon without lowering consumption, and we cannot radically lower consumption without going into recession. But recession has meant growth in unemployment, depression of wages, rising personal debt, mortgage defaults, rising substance abuse, rising suicide rates and so on. Yet, we need to reduce carbon desperately quickly to avoid catastrophic tipping points.²⁸ The answer to that conundrum is not to be found in a linear path or on a Cartesian plane.

Where Does this Leave Us?

As the biblical author Luke invoked, we know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky, but struggle to interpret the present time.²⁹ It is challenging enough to just keep pace with environmental, technological, political, economic, and philanthropic trends, never mind the deeper socio-cultural trends, debates and cleavages that make prognosticating even more difficult. It is clear that a normal, linear response to a profoundly abnormal and nonlinear 'now' will be wholly inadequate. The required response may lie outside not just our current institutional capacities, but beyond our modern imagination; Demanding that we 'see' better, not just with foresight, but with better present-sight. As Margaret Heffernan wrote in her reflection on the banking crisis that led to the Great Recession, "[a]s the banks were melting down, I kept wondering: Why did no one see this coming? I could see it, many people around me could see it. That the world was running on debt was plain to many people. So why were we so surprised? And then I thought: this feeling is familiar. That sensation of knowing something and not knowing something. Skeletons in cupboards. Emperor's new clothes. The elephant in the room. The idea that you're safe as long as you don't recognize the one thing that truly threatens you."³⁰ Echoes of the central conclusion of the 9/11 Commission Report - "failures of imagination".³¹

We have perhaps a decade or two of room to manoeuvre between the current Anthropocene and the coming Novacene, on this eve of the technological singularity, the last years when Homo Sapiens can lay claim to being the most intelligent beings, before either we stumble past the tipping points, before we are overwhelmed by the climate and biosphere catastrophe, or before our very own mechanical creation ascends to the throne.

"All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world."

Siddhartha Gautama (The Buddha)

02 Scanning the Horizon

At the request of the Calgary Foundation, the Institute for Community Prosperity has prepared scans of major current socio-economic trends and developments at local, provincial, national and international scales as well as risks to community prosperity or civil society, including catastrophic risks. New scans were prepared for 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022. This is the seventh such scan, peering into 2023.

Information in this scan is derived from several sources, including news stories, op-eds, policy reports and academic literature. Most of the trends covered in previous scans are still in play, but here I have surfaced a series of new themes, and provided additional context around themes previously touched upon. Like the previous scans, it is a selective sampling of issues, not a comprehensive analysis of all trends in all sectors. As well, these scans are intended to not just be predictive about near future probabilities, but also to add context to current events, and to illuminate undercurrents and 'sleeper' issues. Some observations in this scan are commonly known, while others are closer to the edge - perhaps even a bit startling, contentious, or discordant.

The 2023 Scan revisits some of the issues covered in previous scans, like affordable housing, and climate change, but also looks a number topics previously not explored - including shifting gender norms, biodiversity, and literacy. As with previous scans, it also opens with an essay offering a provocation for what the issues and trends that follow might mean, when we consider them at a deeper systems level.





“I said there’s storm clouds but I’m going to change it. It’s a hurricane. You’d better brace yourself³²”

Jamie Dimon, CEO, JPMorgan Chase

03

ECONOMY

HOW GREAT WILL THIS RECESSION BE? An Economic Forecast

Looking back on the COVID-19 Recession, it was barely a blip, compared with the length and depth of any other deep recession over the past century.³³ This is largely thanks to significant monetary stimulus - ultralow interest rates combined with quantitative easing. The flipside is that this stimulus inevitably supercharged the stock market and real estate market, and we are now dealing with the aftermath - high inflation at the same time governments are dialing back stimulus.

After reaching a 2022 high of 8.8%, global inflation is expected to drop to (a still high) 6.5%. In OECD countries Turkey and Argentina, 2022 inflation exceeded 64% and 92% respectively; and in Zimbabwe, it’s reached almost 300%.³⁴ World Bank President David Malpass warns “[t]he world economy is again in danger ...Even if a global recession is averted, the pain of stagflation could persist for several years.”³⁵ Meanwhile, the S&P 500 saw it’s largest single year decline since 1928, largely a result of the bursting pandemic-era tech bubble, having lost 18.1 per cent of its value over the past year.³⁶

As we wean ourselves off stimulus and see interest rates rise, the world economic outlook is for a slowing economy, from 3.2% growth this past year to 2.7% in 2023, also driven by a stagnant Chinese economy.³⁷ China’s COVID Zero policy, coupled with supply chain risks and geopolitical calculations, have dampened investment and production levels there, and a growing number of companies are looking to shift their manufacturing elsewhere, partly driven by the trend of “near shoring”, which may incidentally also help reduce carbon footprints.³⁸ Canada may also stand to benefit from talented Chinese dissidents fleeing the panoptic surveillance state, much as educated talent is fleeing Russia for Western Europe.

According to the World Bank, the global extreme poverty rate is estimated to have risen from 7.8 percent to 9.1 percent during the pandemic, a reversal after years of positive progress.³⁹ As the Bank points out, “the recent crises have pushed the world further off track from the global goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030. Given current trends, 574 million people—nearly 7 percent of the world’s population—will still be living on less than \$2.15 a day in 2030. And the challenge is made harder by the fact that extreme poverty is concentrated in parts of the world where it will be hardest to eradicate: in Sub-Saharan Africa, in conflict-affected areas, and in rural areas.”⁴⁰

Perhaps the most troubling news globally, however, is the heightened risk of a global food catastrophe.⁴¹ World food prices have hit an all-time high, up an average of 14.3% just in over the last year, including a nearly 18% rise in cereal prices.⁴² According to the World Food Programme, the number of acutely food-insecure people worldwide has almost tripled since 2019, and “a total of 49 million people in 49 countries are teetering on the edge of famine.”⁴³ Malnourishment in Somalia is particularly severe, where the government and aid agencies are resisting using the word ‘famine’ despite all evidence to the contrary.⁴⁴

The UK, already an economic basket-case courtesy of Brexit and a disastrous old-school trickle-down plutocratic tax-break by short-lived Prime Minister Truss (that even the markets rejected) is also bearing the brunt of the European energy crisis. The UK’s trade deficit is \$226 billion, compared with - say, Germany’s trade surplus of \$212 billion or Russia’s surplus of \$190 billion.⁴⁵ Ironically, knowing that much of the Brexit movement was fueled by not-so-thinly veiled racism and xenophobia - the UK’s burgeoning post-Brexit immigrant population is substantially less ‘white’ than pre-Brexit.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Europhilic Ireland has blown past Britain on most measures of prosperity and innovation. Ireland’s GDP per capita is now more than double the UK’s.⁴⁷

National Outlook

Domestically, Like the global rate, the Canadian economy grew at a much slower rate than expected. Canada's growth rate this past year was 3.3% (just a shade over the global rate), and is projected to slow to 1.5% through 2023, though both rates still put Canada near the top of the G7.⁴⁸ The Bank of Canada's estimate for GDP growth is more conservative, at 1% for 2023, and 2% in 2024.⁴⁹ The TSX, despite being about 2,500 points off its historic high reached in March of 2022, has weathered two significant dips this past year in early summer (the first bear market since the initial COVID collapse in 2020) and early autumn, and has been closing near the 20,500 mark since the start of 2023 which is quite strong when viewed on a 5, 10, or 20 year horizon. Population growth in Canada, largely due to increased immigration, is the one consistent bright spot with respect to economic growth, but it is also one of the reasons there has been constant upward demand pressure on the housing market. Of all industrialized countries, only Iceland has stronger population growth than Canada.

Since March of 2022, Canadians have witnessed eight central bank rate hikes, moving from 0.5% to 4.5%.⁵⁰ This is of course meant to calm inflation, which has been at levels not seen since the 1980s (although Canada's rate of inflation increase is among the mildest, globally⁵¹). The cost of living in Calgary has risen by nearly 7% in the past year alone, and the cost of groceries has risen by more than 11 percent (the cost of some items such as fresh vegetables and wheat-based products has blown well past that).

There is always an inertia between interest rate hikes and its effect on inflation, so we will eventually see inflation return to normal(ish) levels, perhaps as low as 3% by the end of next year. Conventional wisdom would hold that a mild domestic recession can be expected as both borrowing and spending slow. The Bank of Canada predicts a 1.5 percent rise in the (historically quite low) unemployment rate, which would be about 150,000 jobs shed. As analyst David Rosenberg notes, in nine previous periods of significant central bank interest rate hikes of this scale, eight have ended with recessions.⁵²

Uneven Prosperity

But Canadians can be forgiven for thinking that we might already be experiencing a range of recession-like conditions. High inflation and a weaker social safety net than during the height of the pandemic had Canada's food banks straining under historically high demand that first peaked at 1.5 million visits in March 2022.⁵³ This was up 35 per cent compared to pre-pandemic visits during the same time period in 2019, though up a staggering 73 per cent in Alberta.⁵⁴ It also included a doubling of demand from Indigenous clients just over the past year. Despite all the vaunted talk about "build back better" and "just transitions," inflation has wiped out limited increases in federal assistance in Canada, most provincial jurisdictions have not increased social assistance substantively, and single households – the fastest rising household type – are at best an afterthought, particularly in Alberta.⁵⁵ Again toward the end of the year, food bank visits skyrocketed beyond levels not previously seen, both in Calgary and nationwide.⁵⁶ We can also expect online gambling, currently at over \$2.5 billion (up from just over \$600 million just two years earlier)⁵⁷ to become an even larger part of the economy, especially as Canadians' economic insecurity intensifies and as metaverse-based "arenas" ramp up.

This spike in food insecurity is happening during a time of low unemployment, which shows both the power of inflation, and the gap between wages the market can bear (at or above the minimum legislated wage) and the wage required to live without accessing social assistance, food charity or subsidized housing. In Calgary that gap is currently about a \$7/hour shortfall.⁵⁸ On the upside, average hourly wages have risen by 5.6% over the past year.⁵⁹ But because it is a tight labour market, it is challenging for the nonprofit sector to compete for talent. While there is some evidence the long-expected 'great retirement' is finally happening in the sector, it is not clear that the phenomenon of 'quiet quitting' (the updated nomenclature for 'work to rule') is having much effect beyond the private sector. We can nonetheless expect nonprofits to implement additional measures to attract and retain talent, from flexible work-from-home arrangements to investing in professional development.

A Possible Severe Recession

There is an emerging consensus that a global recession is likely, probably starting in the second half of 2023. But a growing number of observers are predicting something much worse than normal, perhaps on the scale of the 2008/09 financial crisis. Blackrock, the world's largest asset manager, is not just predicting a global recession, but is warning about a period of "massive upheaval and instability."⁶⁰

Returning to Canada, it is quite possible that our recession could be worse than what is predicted globally, as we the long-delayed housing bubble appears to be finally bursting. Consider some wild facts around just how overleveraged the consumer housing market is: Canadians now spend 14 per cent of their after-tax income servicing debt – a higher debt-servicing burden than in 1981-82, when mortgage rates topped 20 per cent! As Financial Post analyst David Rosenberg points out "The consumer price index has risen 21 per cent while household debt has ballooned 274 per cent since the early 2000s... The home price-to-rent ratio at 146 per cent compares to the historical norm of 78 per cent... By comparison, the peak in the United States during the mid-2000s bubble [which led to the Great Recession] was 128 per cent."⁶¹ Likewise, the ratio of home prices to disposable income is similar to what it was in the US housing bubble in the mid 2000s. In recognition of this significant problem, which has some vexing systemic roots, this scan devotes a specific section to the financialization of housing. Canada is also sitting at a far higher household debt-to-income ratio (Alberta, as always, remains the most over-leveraged): \$1.86 in household debt accompanies every dollar earned by a household in Canada.⁶²

Provincial and Local Outlook

Provincially, ATB Financial's growth forecast is 2.8% (roughly the same as the Provincial government's forecast), which – while modest – would still place Alberta in the lead nationally.⁶³ Average daily oil production in Alberta in 2022 also reached its highest level in the province's history (even without the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion easing access to markets). Buoyed by windfall royalties from the oilpatch, the Alberta government is predicting a \$2.4 billion surplus for 2023-24.⁶⁴ Premier Smith cancelled the Kenney government's planned reinvestment of part of the surplus into the Heritage Savings Fund, continuing a well-established Alberta government commitment to being *here for a good time, not a long time* (to borrow the phrase from CanRock legends Trooper). Consistent with this, the UCP's proposal for orphan well clean-up in Alberta, like Trans Mountain almost wholly subsidized by the federal government, appears tailor-made to absolve industry of the burden, and leave future generations of landowners living with the mess.⁶⁵ As of late Winter, 2022, the Parliamentary Budget Office was unable to confirm whether a single well had been cleaned up and properly decommissioned.⁶⁶ The Province's proposed \$20 billion tax holiday for industry to clean up abandon wells they are already legally obliged to remediate is a sum greater than the value of the entire Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund, which itself is worth far less than it's 1983 peak (when its per capita market value was over \$12,000 per Albertan vs. just over \$4,000 per Albertan today).⁶⁷

Calgary's growth is forecast to be stronger than most Canadian cities, on the heels of a year that saw the second highest level on record of both building permits and housing starts.⁶⁸ Like the rest of the Canadian economy, the optimistic forecast will be tempered by the much higher cost of small business loans as well as the persistent systemic trend of public companies under-investing in new production vis-à-vis higher yield financial instruments, a trend that is ultimately hurting both workers and small businesses.⁶⁹


Talent, Inclusive Innovation, and Shared Prosperity

The language of economic development is shifting, not just to incorporate net zero and EDI goals, but also with respect to inclusive innovation. The Brookfield Inclusive Innovation Monitor noted that Canada is trailing its OECD and G7 peers with respect to inclusive innovation, "while the ability to participate in and benefit from innovation are not equitably distributed across regions, income groups, racialized groups, gender, and (dis)ability."⁷⁰ It is also becoming clearer that our European and perhaps even American peers are more eagerly entering a "Regeneration Generation," where circular economics and regenerative food and energy production is top of mind for a growing number of businesses.⁷¹ Interestingly, the Business Council of Alberta has been raising issues of "equity," "sustainability," and "shared prosperity" – the kind of language you would have only seen among left-leaning social justice groups in a previous decade. Encouragingly, their language and focus have taken a decided shift toward a well-being approach – "making life better" as the focus of thriving business activity, instead of growth as an end in itself.⁷² We are also hearing more about the notion of a job guarantee approach to the long-term problem of technological unemployment as a potential alternative (and perhaps more affordable) than universal basic income.⁷³

The Institute for Community Prosperity, under the leadership of Senior Fellow Dr. David Finch, has partnered with the Canada West Foundation and others to take a closer look at talent development in Alberta, under the moniker *Why Alberta?*⁷⁴ This work has found that youth in Alberta, Vancouver and Toronto *perceive* that Alberta does not offer a breadth of career choices beyond oil and gas, that the province lacks cultural vibrancy, and that there is a lack of diversity and inclusion.⁷⁵ The perception of young people is overwhelmingly that oil and gas is far more dominant with respect to employment than it actually is (believing, on average, that 70% of available jobs in Alberta are in the petroleum sector when the true number is closer to 6% of jobs, and falling). Alarming, 68% of those 18-24 say they plan to leave Alberta within the next 5 years.

While the political rhetoric over the past few years has doubled down on the stereotype that Alberta prosperity equals oil and gas (and certainly successive governments have done their best to tether government's annual fiscal capacity to this sector), the reality is of course much different. In fact, diversification is happening rapidly (into agri-food, life sciences, cybersecurity, renewables, and many other areas), and Calgary is in need of not just tech talent (which is outpacing the growth in all other fields by a six to one margin), but specialized trades talent (e.g. solar installation). It is also in need of adaptation. As Finch, along with Janet Lane and Lee Ackerman write in *A City that Adapts*, "...the future of Calgary is no longer about waiting until the next boom. Calgary's economy is shifting, and so are the demands of its employers. Paradoxically, Calgary faces both a skills surplus and skills deficit. The problem is the increasing gap between the skills employers' are demanding and the skills Calgarians possess. So, what now?"⁷⁶ An additional struggle is for young people to learn about how most of the local economy is business-to-business, where they are currently more apt to see the economy through a consumer lens.

Finch also talks about the importance of "talent magnets" (not just for young talent, but also mid-career talent), pointing to cities like Austin, Texas, which the research indicates is far more important than putting effort into being a "company magnet." With the rise of digital nomadism, talent increasingly lives and works where it wants, though this is balanced by the agglomeration potential for innovation that certain cities offer. This suggests that not only is a strong start-up and growth/scaling support ecosystem vital, especially for women, but also that investments in arts, culture, co-working, mainstreets, sports and recreation, education, natural assets, and other realms of the 'experience economy' have a stronger ROI, relative to attracting companies with direct subsidies and tax incentives. A particular focus on the experience economy for immigrants is also vital, as so much of the high impact talent potential is in diaspora communities. A key part of this is the talent development ecosystem. Most progressives and conservatives can agree that careers are also increasingly non-linear and require constant upgrading. The GEDSA Science Breakthroughs Radar projects that economic and technological forces will further push governments in the coming decade to implement policies that ensure human capital is not wasted and that lifelong education and retraining is commonplace, preparing workers and rising generations for an ever-more-rapidly changing workplace.⁷⁷



“Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has led to the biggest land war in Europe since 1945, the most serious risk of nuclear escalation since the Cuban missile crisis and the most far-reaching sanctions regime since the 1930s. Soaring food and energy costs have fuelled the highest rates of inflation since the 1980s in many countries and the biggest macroeconomic challenge in the modern era of central banking. Assumptions that have held for decades—that borders should be inviolable, nuclear weapons won’t be used, inflation will be low and the lights in rich countries will stay on—have all been simultaneously shaken.”⁷⁸

Zanny Minton Beddoes, *The Economist*

EVANESCENT ELECTIONEERING? Profligate Populists and New Blue Democrats



“The lunatics are trying to take over the asylum. I will not let this mainstream conservative party become an agent for extreme, hateful, intolerant, bigoted and crazy views. Sorry to be so blunt with you, but you need to understand what the stakes are here.”⁹²

Jason Kenney, Former Premier of Alberta

Global Political Outlook

The Collins English Dictionary have declared “permacrisis” - defined as an “an extended period of instability and insecurity” - to be their word of the year for 2022. The death of Queen Elizabeth, after a reign of over 70 years, and Sovereign to 13 Prime Ministers dating back to Louis St. Laurent, is symbolic of this new era of instability. The US Intelligence Community’s Annual Threat Assessment warns that “[t]he United States and its allies will face an increasingly complex and interconnected global security environment marked by the growing specter of great power competition and conflict.”⁷⁹ Martin Wolf of the Financial Times adds that the current situation may hold more potential for conflict between superpowers than at any time in the Cold War.⁸⁰ In addition, all governments, at every level, should be wary of the economic turmoil to come in 2023. A deep global recession, and potentially even deeper Canadian recession, will mean that this coming year could be quite volatile politically.

The biggest land war in Europe since the second world war has effectively re-united the West. But western relations with Russia are at their lowest ebb since before Khrushchev, and Putin has his own chilling observations on what can happen when “rats are cornered”.⁸¹ At the same time, the West is more divided from the rest of the world, with the majority of the globe’s people living in countries that do not support Western sanctions on Russia. Russia’s potential use of tactical nukes is unlikely, and would turn global opinion more solidly against him. But Russia’s sabre-rattling no doubt has emboldened others: The US Threat Assessment also notes that “China is building a larger and increasingly capable nuclear missile and bomber force that is more survivable, more diverse, and on higher alert than in the past, including nuclear missile systems designed to manage regional escalation and ensure an intercontinental strike capability in any scenario.”⁸² North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has also recently stepped back into the spotlight he surely was missing. The top of Kim’s 2023 wish list is an ‘exponential’ increase in country’s nuclear arsenal, which includes intercontinental ballistic missiles.⁸³

The coming year portends further rough waters for Chinese politics. Not only has China had to step back from its zero-COVID policy, facing revolt on a scale not seen since the days leading up to the Tiananmen Square uprising, but it will see India surpass it to become the world’s most populous country this year. The West is gradually shifting its manufacturing and contracting elsewhere. The recently announced controls on US exports of semi-conductors to China - an “act of economic warfare,” according to the Financial Times’ chief economics commentator - will have a demonstrable dampening effect on China’s economic development.⁸⁴ The CBC recently closed its Beijing bureau, one of many signs that diplomacy between Canada and China is at its most challenged since the thawing of relations in the 70s and 80s. Xi Jinping’s public dressing down of Justin Trudeau is a rare show of frustration with a western government. Xi’s increasingly strident tone and consolidation of power may be early warnings of a coming show of military might. Xi is no doubt watching Putin’s mistake in Ukraine unfold with interest, but a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, while less likely now, is not implausible.

For every defeated Bolsonaro and Trumpian congressional hopeful there are other extremists and autocrats bursting onto the scene. Giorgia Meloni, Italy's first female Prime Minister and western Europe's first far-right head of state since Franco, entered politics at the age of 15 via the fascism-nostalgic Movimento Sociale Italiano. Her journey since then has been a travelogue of conspiracies and socially conservative crusades.⁸⁵ The US mid-term elections, despite being a set-back for the Republicans relative to their expectations - nonetheless brought in legions of election denialists, followed by chaos in the search for a House leader. At minimum, it is hard to see the Republican party staying united as a cohesive party. More ominously, these developments once again portend to a powerful proto-fascist movement, whether led by Donald Trump or some even more committed ideologue. As Ira Wells, a global politics writer noted in the *Globe and Mail* recently, "The United States, once the anchor of global democracy, has recently provided a case study in democratic collapse. The political deadlock, gerrymandering of election districts, inundation of 'dark money,' spiking distrust in government, and growth of misinformation and polarization - all of it suggests a democracy on the brink." On a hopeful note, however, the same writer noted that a more powerful movement may be students around the world - from Iran to Hong Kong to Russia - working in the opposite direction - to undermine autocracy. Strong student voices are the key to a healthy future. As the late Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire opined, education is freedom.

Other global dynamics to watch include the potential famine in the horn of Africa, the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the popular uprising against the Iranian theocracy, and energy shortages in Europe (along with the acceleration of green power, particularly in Germany⁸⁶). The third UK Prime Minister since the start of the year, expect Rishi Sunak to stay in power through 2023 (with a general election not required until 2025). The US is now joining Canada in its strained relationship with Saudi Arabia, and the Qatar FIFA World Cup proved to be a poisoned chalice, bringing a one-time pulse of tourism, but drawing the world's attention to the homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and racist exploitation of workers in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf states. Israel saw the return of the indefatigable Benjamin Netanyahu, dependant though on an ultra-right anti-democratic coalition saddled with corruption and other criminal charges, prompting tens of thousands of pro-democracy Israelis to take to the streets.

Federal Political Outlook

The first federal poll of 2023 revealed growing weariness with Justin Trudeau as Prime Minister, with a Nanos poll indicating that more Canadians than not believe the country is headed in the wrong direction.⁸⁷ The last time this happened was at the end of the Harper reign a decade ago. Indeed, 2023 carries a high likelihood of profound political damage for the Liberals, as Canadians - with good reason - are unhappy about the direction the economy is going.⁸⁸ By far the most compelling issues for voters right now are inflation, housing affordability, health care, and perhaps climate change. If the recession is as serious as some analysts predict (see the previous section of this scan), the state of the economy could bring down the government, with the biggest cleavage between the Liberals and NDP being housing affordability. While there is a long runway to the next election, Opposition Leader Pierre Poilievre

stands to benefit from growing long-term weariness of Trudeau as Prime Minister. Although we have not seen knives out within Liberal ranks anywhere close to what we witnessed in the Chretien/Martin years, former Finance Minister Bill Morneau's new book, *Where to from Here* (2023), is highly critical of Trudeau's obsession with image and poll numbers at the expense of effective governance and rigorous public policy development.⁸⁹ Average electoral support for the Trudeau Liberals is well below popular support for the Chretien/Martin-era Liberals, and a full 12 percentage points below the Pierre Trudeau-led Liberals. A pale shadow of his father's gravitas and ability to usher forth a compelling vision for Canada, and with highly capable ministers no doubt eager to step up to a leadership race (not to mention many outsiders - one imagines Mark Carney, Naheed Nenshi, Jody Wilson-Raybould, Don Iveson, and many others as potential candidates), Trudeau Junior, who's numbers barely eclipse 30% in polling, would be well-advised to step aside prior to the next election, likely a full 2+ years away. A refusal to call a public inquiry into foreign interference in the last two elections could be extra damaging (but then again, so could the inquiry itself). Trudeau's intention to lead the party into the next election has been clearly stated. Watch for this calculation to change as Canada's economic (especially housing affordability) and health care woes deepen.

The start of the year for the federal government was dominated by "Freedom Convoy" politics, on which public opinion largely broke in the Liberals' favour. As Convoyers partied with fireworks and propane cannisters, conveyed with help from the hapless Ottawa Police, the vast majority of politicians - at all levels - spoke out against this weeks-long demonstration of infodemic-fueled rage. The convoy was successful in one respect: It forced the question of where Conservative party members broke, pro-convoy or anti-convoy, ultimately leading to the resignation of leader Erin O'Toole after mere months in office (somewhat ironically, given that the aim was to remove Trudeau). But after starting the year in turmoil, the Conservatives ended the year with a spring in their step, broadly united behind the new leader and buoyed by tepid approval ratings for Trudeau.

In Pierre Poilievre, who won the leadership in a landslide, the Conservatives have chosen a leader that - as both an orator and as an irritant to the governing party - is vastly more skilled than either of his two predecessors, Erin O'Toole or Andrew Scheer. But what should concern Conservatives is that it has not been Poilievre's curious pre-leadership foibles embracing cryptocurrency, criticizing the Bank of Canada, and supporting the Freedom Convoy that are putting Canadians off. It is his post-leadership presence; it seems that the more media time he gets, the more Canadians are put off. The very attributes that are a thorn in the Liberal's side can also come across as irritating to the casual observer. But this is likely fixable. The chronic problem for the Conservatives is that they remain deeply unpopular with women.⁹⁰ The tendency, honed under the former Reform Party strain of the party, of picking white, male, leaders that represent a kind of Leave-it-to-Beaveresque 'square' persona may be what the base desires, but it often reads as cornball cringe for every other demographic. Worse still, as an end-of-year Angus Reid poll suggests, the percentage of Canadians who hold an unfavourable view of Poilievre is much higher than his three previous successors, and double Stephen Harper at a similar early point in his leadership. So, despite his many skills and the appearance of party unity, he is not yet the heir apparent to 24 Sussex.

The federal NDP's popularity – on paper – should be buoyed by the antipathy toward Trudeau and Poilevre, as well as their positions on many of the top-of-mind affordability and access issues plaguing the country. However, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh has so far not presented much of a threat to Trudeau. The Liberal calculation is likely that the NDP support will simply collapse into Liberal votes, panicked by a potential Poilevre victory, though it's worth pointing out that the upper limit of those who would even be considering voting Liberal – right now at 45% in the Nanos poll – suggests that NDP voters should not be taken for granted. It has not helped the NDP's fortunes that Singh gave Trudeau a long runway to the next election in exchange for – so it appears – modest new dental benefits (a positive step to be sure, but a pale shadow of the NDP-Liberal minority pacts of the 60's that transformed Canada in many ways, building healthcare and much of the modern welfare state). Singh was not able to negotiate a true Coalition government with seats at the cabinet table, in sharp contrast to Germany, for example, where the Green Party has held enormous leverage in joining a coalition government led by the Liberal-equivalent SPD. The federal NDP has also not been able to bask in the credit on the policy front. All of the progressive bills the Liberals are enacting are more likely to be attributed to them in the voters' eyes, not to the NDP, and the Liberals were no doubt thrilled to see the NDP spend its money attacking Poilevre instead of the government. In the coming months, watch for Singh to push much harder on the health care and affordable housing files. If he fails to, the NDP would be wise to fast-track a leadership review. But if he is successful, there might even be a narrow but possible path to 24 Sussex; As the two main parties languish in 30% purgatory, that leaves 40% of the electorate willing to consider other options.

One other important political dimension to address is progress on reconciliation.⁹¹ The Yellowhead Institute, an Indigenous public policy think tank, issued a Calls to Action Accountability Special Report in 2022 with the following summary (and note the provocative conclusion):

“At the end of a year that saw a flurry of reconciliatory gestures: a papal apology, the second-ever National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, and legislative activity toward a new National Council for Reconciliation, we find that reconciliation in this country is still only just beginning. ... While the completion of these Calls is welcome news, in the broader landscape of reconciliation, we conclude that a tremendous amount more needs to be done —especially in areas like health, education, child welfare, justice, and Indigenous languages — if Canada hopes to take real responsibility for the genocidal legacy of the residential school system.... Perhaps, though, the ongoing failure of Canada to keep its promises when it comes to the Calls to Action highlights the limits of ‘reconciliation’ as a framework for meaningful and lasting change. And we have to wonder: should we just abandon ‘reconciliation’ altogether?”⁹⁴

Provincial Political Outlook

To say that Alberta's political landscape is polarized is in one sense an understatement, but it is also inaccurate, at least with respect to ideology. The UCP has certainly moved toward the “Wildrose” side of the “United” part of their moniker, as the former Progressive Conservative part continues to lose traction and influence in the party. The strongest performing cosmopolitan mainstream Tory candidate in the last UCP leadership race – Rebecca Schultz – maxed out at 8.4% of the vote. So referring to the UCP as “Tory” is no longer remotely accurate. Moreover, “conservative” may be the label better applied to the NDP, given that the NDP governed under Rachel Notley's first stint as Premier with policy choices – fiscally at least – to the right of the Peter Lougheed government. The NDP platform contains arguably more status quo provisions than the UCP agenda. In many respects the NDP has claimed the Red Tory terrain, and probably even parts of the centrist Tory (fiscally conservative, socially progressive) landscape, in addition to owning most of landscape in the centre-left. The introduction of Tory blue into the NDP logo symbolically represents this.

From a values standpoint, with fundraising stats confirming as much, and with the UCP shift to the Wildrose right complete, the New Blue Democrats may now be the “natural governing” party of Alberta, much as the PCs were from the early 70s through the early noughts. When polled on how they would vote in the last US election, Alberta was more Democrat, and significantly less Republican, than even reliably blue states like Washington, Oregon and Illinois.⁹⁵ In fact, a party that would run on a strong green-left platform (i.e. to the left of the NDP) would likely fare better in the next election than a broadly centrist option like the Liberal or Alberta parties, which are otherwise just white noise in the face of the blue-orange New Democrat juggernaut.



And even as fiscal norms have tended to shift rightward, social norms continue to veer left. Alberta has elected more female leaders than any other Canadian jurisdiction, and hot button social issues of the past are not currently on the radar. Open allegiance to an anti-abortion agenda is radioactive, from a broad electability standpoint. Smith's main rivals, all deeply socially conservative evangelical Christians, could not best their libertarian rival (the first premier to decline to be sworn in with a Bible).⁹⁶ Florida's repugnant 'don't say gay' law, aped in other states, has no analogue here. Despite some UCP roll-backs to certain provisions of the NDP's 2017 act supporting Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools, Alberta continues to have arguably the most progressive legislative framework in support of GSAs. And on immigration, Albertans – like Canadians in general – have rarely if ever been as supportive, if polls are to be believed (although, according to one recent poll, Albertans are the most likely to hold the view that many refugees are not “real refugees”).⁹⁷ As yet another indicator of this shift, thirty years ago, only one in three Canadians valued multiculturalism, but that support has now shifted to two-thirds of the population.⁹⁸

Where the real polarity lies is urban-rural; Rarely, if ever, in Alberta's history has there been a starker rural-urban divide. Premier Danielle Smith wisely turned down the opportunity to run in an urban bye-election. Having been elected on the seventh ballot, with barely 2% greater approval than Jason Kenney's last leadership review (53.3% to 51.4% respectively), Smith barely has a mandate from her own party. Despite this, she has managed to keep the party united, at least in the short term. Her former leadership opponents have so far swallowed their pride and marched in lock step. Municipal leaders for the most part have either bit their tongues or praised the UCP's accessibility. And as with most pre-election governments of any political stripe, the taps have been quite open on spending – from the \$600 per child inflation relief to infrastructure promises,

including a commitment to build passenger rail in the Bow Valley corridor. A quiet end-of-year appointment of MLA Tracy Allard to a Parliamentary Secretary position, was the 38th cabinet appointee for Smith (nearly 10 more than Doug Ford's Ontario cabinet, and more than triple the size of former Premier Rachel Notley's cabinet). Expensive though this may be, it has the effect of neutralizing internal dissent, and making cabinet – in theory – more accessible. The danger though, beyond the ballooning cost of elected official salaries, is that the next time someone says something controversial – the next ‘lake of fire’ comment – it is more likely to be a cabinet minister, not an easily-dismissible bumpkin backbencher.

But despite these gains, Smith is most likely heading into rough electoral waters. In the November bi-election that sent her to the legislature, most polling stations *within* the city of Medicine Hat revealed voters favouring the NDP candidate.⁹⁹ For urban voters, and indeed many rural voters, concerns about health care and inflation dominate, whereas for Smith's base it is a victimization narrative that seduces – anything bad that happens in Alberta is Ottawa's fault. An easy formulation, but limited in its devotees. See the section later in this scan for more on the broader phenomenon of “rage farming.” Indeed, in an end-of-year poll, only 25% of Albertans believe that the province is heading in the right direction¹⁰⁰, despite a rosy short-term fiscal picture and the province outperforming the country on most economic markers (save for housing prices, which is a good thing, as described elsewhere in this scan). This was before the most recent allegations (and proud admission, later reversed) of pressure on crown prosecutors from the Premier's office to go easy on those who were plotting to murder police at the Coutts border crossing.

The Republic of Alberta

Subtlety was never Danielle Smith's strong point, nor was thinking through the consequences of shooting from the hip. It is easy, and even lucrative, to have no 'crazy radar' when hosting a talk show, but governing is not entertainment. It is serious business that demands a measure of knowledge about how government works (separation between the political and judiciary branches, for example), and a curiosity about where citizens are at, in terms of values and priorities. Smith's lack of knowledge of, or apparent interest in, the rest of Canada reveals an intense parochialism, marked by that mix of paranoia and bravado that marks populist demagogues. Here is a Premier who has in the recent past openly advocated for the "annexation" of Prince Rupert, promoted horse medication as a cure for COVID, and suggested that Ukraine give up territory to Russia as well its phantom nuclear arsenal (an arsenal they have not possessed since 2001). The very idea of sovereignty taking hold as a mainstream concept would have been a fringe idea back in the early decades of Alberta's shift from a have-not to a have province. This kind of record makes Bible Bill Aberhart's eccentricities look positively dull by comparison. As University of Calgary political scientist Lisa Young observed "when asked how she could justify giving the Cabinet emergency powers (since walked back), Smith replied that the federal government was trying to impose greenhouse gas emissions restrictions that would be devastating to the oil and gas industry. So what we're hearing is that the democratic rights of Albertans are secondary to the interests of oil and gas. Let that sink in for a moment."¹⁰¹

Smith's miscalculations in hurriedly introducing the *Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act* are legion; it was a not-so-subtle attempt to try and goad Ottawa into a fight, just before a provincial election, bait they have yet to take (allowing Alberta MP Randy Boissonnault to push back, rather than the Prime Minister or more prominent members of cabinet). It appears that Smith has instead unwittingly picked a fight with her own electorate, from municipalities of all sizes to Indigenous governments to pension holders, school boards, universities, chambers of commerce, singles (the fastest growing demographic), to any Albertan that might either think of themselves as Canadian first, or who otherwise worries about the investment and labour mobility consequences of the province doubling down on its reputation as the spoiled brat of Confederation (to a growing number of Canadians outside the province). Not only has the Act prompted a constitutional challenge from the Onion Lake First Nation (their chances of success are high), but many others are interpreting the Sovereignty Act as provincial overreach – a politically audacious play for a Premier who does not yet have a mandate from Albertans at large. While most Albertans may not fancy Trudeau, it is not a rejection of the idea of Canada per se, or of the Charter (which is held sacred even by the Freedom Convoy set). Smith's legislation is also premised on a factually incorrect understanding of Confederation and of how Alberta came into being.¹⁰² It is also baffling that a 21st Century Canadian political leader at any level cannot anticipate potential Indigenous opposition – or understand that there is a duty to consult – on such a fundamental reframing of the Canadian Constitution (despite the preamble in the Act disingenuously claiming it is not about undermining the Constitution).¹⁰³

But even as the UCP has so far weathered the Sovereignty Act storm, and as their numbers trend upward with royalty-fueled public spending announcements, political risk still lurks. As just one example, musings about metallurgical coal mining in the eastern slopes have sent southern Alberta Mayors, ranchers, First Nations, and environmentalists scrambling to dust off their advocacy notebooks, having thought the issue had been largely put to bed. Watch for the NDP to also hit them hard on the pension issue, which could galvanize older Canadians, a demographic that might otherwise skew conservative.

The result of this combination will be a nail-biter spring election, with the NDP likely sweeping Edmonton, doing well in Calgary, and potentially even picking up seats in other urban or bedroom-community ridings. As Smith opens the spending taps and dials down the fringy rhetoric, she is also aware that *too much* of a pivot away from pinchpenny populism could result in knives out and a sense of betrayal from the 'base,' as Jason Kenney discovered with even mild COVID public health protocols. The average length of tenure of the last four conservative premiers in Alberta is 18 months.

Local Political Outlook

Municipal politics in Calgary is quieter and less colourful than what has been happening provincially or federally. With the next election still three years off, the largest fireworks in the short term are likely to be between the City and the Province. So far, despite municipal opposition to the Alberta Sovereignty Act across the province, Premier Smith and her cabinet appear to have been quick to reach out to municipalities. In Calgary, this has taken on the form of common ground on an airport LRT extension and rail service in the Bow Valley Corridor. Smith knows she cannot alienate Calgary, and suburban voters in some of the most UCP-friendly Calgary ridings are expecting the Green Line to proceed, for example, as well as greater health care infrastructure investments.

Ideological bickering on Council also appears to be at a low ebb, with the loudest reactionary voices on Council – Sean Chu and Dan MacLean – embroiled in their own ethics controversies.¹⁰⁴ Still, Mayor Jyoti Gondek and other councillors more generally will have to work hard to gain citizens' trust. Polling this year and last revealed that Calgarian's evaluation of Council's performance was rated near a 10-year low, with a 35% approval rating for the Mayor.¹⁰⁵ Gondek may well prove to have significant staying power, as she has a strong grasp of a wide range of urban issues and her networks extend from the development industry across much of civil society. There have also been demonstrable attempts to open up local government, for example through the public release of the Calgary Equity Index. Council's strategic direction for the coming three years is framed around "resilience".¹⁰⁶ However, a decade after the catastrophic Calgary flood, the "resilience" framing may be past its best-before date.

Democratic Deficit

Two decades ago, when Paul Martin became Canada's 21st Prime Minister, he spoke of the "democratic deficit" in Canada, indicated through declining voter turnout, declining youth participation, and a system that did not facilitate mass participation in any meaningful way. Little action came from this rhetoric, and Martin was soon swept out of power by the Harper Conservatives. And while Harper's mentor and forebear, Preston Manning, was also concerned about the democratic deficit, his successor had no such interest. Despite a few modest reforms under Trudeau, such as ending partisan appointments to the Senate and making ministerial mandate letters public, the push to maintain the status quo is strong. Trudeau's early abandonment of electoral reform (an election promise leading to his first mandate), revealed much about his lack of interest in pro-democratic reform.

As Jason Kenney has charitably, but not inaccurately, described our current system: "We are the inheritors of great institutions built around abiding principles which were generated by a particular historical context. Our Westminster parliamentary democracy, part of our constitutional monarchy, is the guardian of a unique tradition of ordered liberty and the rule of law, all of which is centred on a belief in the inviolable dignity of the human person and an obligation to promote the common good."¹⁰⁷

But a defining feature of this system is "first-past-the-post" riding-based elections. Used in the UK and the US, but not in most western democracies, first-past-the-post was designed in the 19th century to maintain stability and elite consensus (with two parties representing two flavours of vanilla) within an Imperial frame. But this system is deeply anachronous, and is producing such skewed results that it is breeding cynicism and affirming to the vast majority of Canadians the adage "my vote doesn't matter". And indeed, it doesn't matter, for example, if you are a conservative in a core urban riding or in the far north, a liberal in most rural regions, a socialist in most agricultural regions, or a green party supporter almost anywhere outside of the Gulf Islands. The popular vote for the governing Liberals has been steadily dropping in each election, with the current government having benefitted from a particularly blatant example of how the first-past-the-post system tends toward stability over popular preference; In the last federal election, the Conservatives received more of the popular vote than the Liberals, so would have been given the first opportunity to form government under a proportional system. Similarly, the recent Quebec election revealed the massively distorting effect when multiple parties vie within a system that was designed for two parties, skewing the results well away from actual voter preferences.

Additionally, most Canadians do not belong to a political party, and far fewer are engaged on any regular basis. The main touch points are elections every 4 years, even though we have technologies that enable mass participation much more frequently. Politicians still speak of 'sacrifice' in public office, often with a kind of martyrdom complex, even though the system tends to bias and incentivize life-long career politicians (highly skilled at politics, but not necessarily public policy or participatory engagement).

The public engagement efforts of most governments in Canada have not markedly changed in the last half century, despite fleeting experiments in participatory budgeting, citizens assemblies, and crowdsourcing policy ideas – the abandonment and undermining of which has just made people more cynical. Even the rule of law – the very essence of the Magna Carta – seemed undermined in those first few weeks of 2023, as the police failed to even appear to be enforcing the law in the face of the Freedom Convoy. The abuses of the Charter are legion as well, with provincial governments casually invoking the notwithstanding clause, undermining human rights and collective bargaining rights. If there is some kind of full-spectrum "wokism", the dog whistle du jour, it sure isn't winning the day. We are creating an ethos that welcomes reactionaries with axes to grind, but repels those with nobler public service intentions. The age of rage is supplanting the age of civility.

Just one year after the spectacle of the Freedom Convoy, and against all common sense and logic, we are in a province powered by the very ethos that fueled the convoy.¹⁰⁸ But there is a growing popular backlash across the country at provincial attempts to undermine the Constitution and the Rule of Law, from Quebec's xenophobic invocation of the notwithstanding clause, to Ontario's use of the Clause (subsequently rescinded) to engage in petty class warfare, to Saskatchewan's bizarre insistence on creating a provincial tax collection agency, not exactly what the people are clamoring for, least of all small 'c' conservative Canadians. The Alberta sovereignty act, much like some of the obscure, expensive and controversial ideas that emerged in the Kenney Premiership – most notably an Alberta police force and the potentially explosive intention to opt out of the popular Canada Pension Plan, lack either a compelling 'why' - a base of evidence - or any discernable grassroots push. It reveals more of a policy reliance on Russian bots and Breitbart devotees, with perhaps a veneer of respectability from mouldering ivory tower theories, largely from the emeritus remnants of the "Calgary School."



“This persistent gap between capacity of organizations and demand for services and programs raises questions of how the sector will cope moving forward.”¹⁰⁹

Imagine Canada, Our Diversity Is Our Strength: Improving Working Conditions in Canadian Nonprofits, 2022.



05

PHILANTHROPY

ON THE ROPES:
A Civil Society Forecast

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“...the [philanthropic] traditions and cultures and practices of one culture [among] a very diverse set of cultures has been legally put above the others, and that is problematic for all of us.”

Lucy Bernholz, philanthropy futurist and head of the Stanford Digital Civil Society Lab¹²⁶

Burnout, Bankruptcies, and other Breaking Points

In an era of cascading crises, the necessity for social innovation has never been greater. As other sections in this scan and previous scans have indicated in various ways, civil society has been under multiple stressors, from long-term declines in funding and donations, to having to deal with a widespread mental health crisis and a growing epidemic of loneliness and social isolation, to a breakdown in social discourse through polarization, and mis- and dis-information. As Kim Samuel, founder of the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, observes “today, it’s increasingly clear: Building a ‘we’ society isn’t only about building a more caring culture. It’s about saving democracy itself.”¹¹⁰ Jennifer Moss, author of *The Burnout Epidemic* (2021), notes how important peer and community networks are to rejuvenating the “chronically tired”, adding that mental health insurance claims – according to the Canadian Life and Health Insurance Association – have climbed 75% since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹¹

In the wake of the pandemic and a decades-long growing structural ‘social deficit’ (described in more detail in previous scans), many nonprofit organizations are shuttering, rationalizing or scaling back their operations, or amalgamating with other nonprofit organizations through mergers or acquisitions. According to CanadaHelps, charitable donations are down Canada-wide, the drop made less steep only by humanitarian donations for hurricane and flood relief as well as donations in support of Ukraine.¹¹² Worldwide, humanitarian agencies have had to weather a record funding gap.¹¹³ Of 12,000-plus faith-based sites in Canada, it is estimated that about a third are in financial trouble, which translates to a growing shortage of community spaces over the coming decade.¹¹⁴ Charitable giving has long been fickle, influenced to some extent by trending current events, media, celebrity, brand recognition, or any other number of dynamics that have nothing to do with social impact. As an example, giving to Black-led organizations in Canada was anomalously high in 2020, with many hoping this represented a new normal. But, like in the US (though even more pronounced) donations to Black-led groups in the subsequent two years tanked to be roughly on par with pre-2020 levels.¹¹⁵ Within Alberta, charities working on higher profile issues that have received temporary or emergency injections of cash – food, mental health and shelter housing in particular – have seen short term increases in revenue. But most organizations, including those focused on sports, arts, environment, and public safety, have seen dramatic declines in revenue.¹¹⁶ Inflation has made financial pressures even more profound for nonprofits, raising occupancy and operational costs, and pushing many to the breaking point.

At the same time, there is rapidly growing demand for community-based services: A poll by Ipsos, commissioned by CanadaHelps, finds that 22 per cent of Canadians plan to access charitable services over the next six months, up from 14 per cent last January, just to meet basic needs.¹¹⁷ The poll also found that younger Canadians, aged 18-34, are most need of assistance, with an alarming one in three anticipating they will require community-provided shelter, clothing, and food in the coming months. Albertans exceeded the national average, with 30 per cent of Albertans planning to meet their basic needs with supplemental assistance from charitable organizations.

However, sixty per cent of Canada’s charities say demand for their services has exceeded their capacity to deliver.¹¹⁸ The mismatch between citizen demand and charitable supply appears to be particularly prevalent in Alberta, where there is much less government support for the sector than in the past, as a study by the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (CCVO) recently pointed out.¹¹⁹ The CCVO report noted, for example, that funding requests to the Alberta Civil Society Fund, the one notable new sector-wide provincial funding program “were 22 times the available budget, with fewer than 1/10 applicants selected”

Digital Delivery and Other Creative Responses

For many organizations, these forces have accelerated shifts to online service delivery, transforming into primarily digital entities. VolunteerConnect, formerly Volunteer Calgary, then Propellus, is now entirely a digital platform. The Calgary Counselling Centre, Distress Centre, and YWCA Edmonton are others who have moved to a mainly digital organizational environment, with no plans to return to analog/in person in any significant way. One of the benefits of moving to digital has been cost savings for clientele on transit, parking, and child care. Such examples affirm what Katie Gibson of the new Canadian Centre for Digital Resilience observes generally, in that we are seeing “digital transformation being treated as a sector imperative, not just an organizational challenge.”¹²⁰

These dynamics have prompted many organizations to shift their fundraising and public awareness strategies. GIV3, for example, which was instrumental in bringing Giving Tuesday to Canada, has shifted their focus toward “systemic policy improvements for the charitable sector.”¹²¹ As Bruce McDonald, the CEO of Imagine Canada, has noted, it is important for civil society organizations to have strong cores with maximum adaptability in the face of cascading crises, and to provide decent work and competitively-priced compensation. This requires far more trust-based philanthropy, multi-year funding contracts, and much more robust incentives to collaborate, experiment, and innovate. Some philanthropic funders – Suncor Energy Foundation, for example – are indexing their grants to inflation. Trust-based philanthropy continues to slowly rise – or, depending on your perspective, recover to historic levels, before we let the unholy alliance of accountability and risk-aversion culture meld with Silicon Valley’s obsession with

‘strategic philanthropy.’¹²² It is ironic that there is more trust in private sector investing, including venture capital, than in the sector that is supposed to be the wellspring of trust (and the very institutional manifestation of social capital). Collaboration in the private sector, exemplified in Lego’s many co-branded collaborations, or in software collaboration through GitHub or Google’s Android platform, for example, is increasingly becoming the norm.¹²³ But collaboration in the nonprofit sector continues to lack internal or external drivers, the funding ecosystem still incentivizing competitive hoarding of new approaches, not to mention data and insights.

The Human Resource Jam

Human resources are another challenge facing nonprofits in Canada. As noted in the previous economic update portion of this scan, the sector is having an increasingly difficult time competing for and retaining talent. The average annual salary for those working for community nonprofits is \$38,716, compared to \$57,137 in the economy overall.¹²⁴ Workers tend to be older and better educated than the economy-wide averages, but face lower salaries and benefits, and difficult employment conditions. The vast majority of nonprofit sector employment continues to be female (77%), and the sector is more likely than the private or public sectors to employ immigrants, who represent 47% of the non-profit workforce.¹²⁵ In fact, half of all jobs held by immigrant women and almost a third of jobs held by Indigenous and racialized women are in the nonprofit sector. The CCVO report *Too Essential to Fail*, lays out well the ‘perfect storm’ of staffing, funding, and pressure to serve a growing number of clientele:

“As organizations consider re-hiring they are reporting difficulty in finding and keeping staff. While many organizations report they plan to increase wages, thin operating budgets and funding agreements make this a challenge. This comes at a time when government supports, such as the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) and the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS), are no longer available, and at a time of rising inflation. Nonprofits are apprehensive about their ability to keep up. They cannot pass on prices to clients like for profit businesses, and increased demand is expected to continue. The end of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) also put pressure on nonprofits that serve populations struggling to meet basic needs.”¹²⁷

Policy Pluses

On the plus side, a number of significant policy changes this year will at least provide some reprieve. The CRA disbursement quota increase from 3.5% to 5% will restore charitable disbursement from endowments with assets greater than \$1 million to its historic norm. While some pushed for an even more aggressive disbursement quota, this strikes a balance between those who claim that foundations must steward endowed gifts in order to meet future priorities and those who believe that the urgency of contemporary issues requires more assertive charitable investment in the present. Ironically, this may have been a tough year to introduce this shift, as some foundations, like Ontario's Campbellford/Seymour Community Foundation, have paused grantmaking altogether (due to significant dips in the market value of endowments).¹²⁸

The more radical and interesting policy shift is, effective this year, the allowance for charities to distribute funds to non-charities. As Jean-Marc Mangin, President of Philanthropic Foundations Canada, notes, "this new regime for supporting non-qualified donees is one of the biggest advancements in legislation regulating our sector in decades."¹²⁹ The new rules make it easier for registered charities to work with non-charities in Canada and abroad. The CRA's focus on charities' "direction and control", has too often landed on the ground as "paternalism and colonialism", and this regulatory shift helps right this balance. An example of the effect of this change is that an international aid NGO can now distribute funds to local organizations who have not been recognized by the CRA, helping re-balance the power dynamic in favour of local communities who are the best and most active agents in their own development. It will also be a significant boost to the arts sector, enabling more artists to access charitable dollars.¹³⁰ A chamber ensemble may already have a charitable number, as is common when the musical genre is classical, but a new blues, country, or metal group is unlikely to have access to the same status. This helps shift – modestly – such arbitrary inequities. Draft guidance on how this change will work in practice is now posted on the CRA's website.¹³¹

We are also seeing a much more sophisticated emerging approach to social impact measurement, as reported in some detail in last year's scan.¹³² As the private sector struggles to measure ESG performance, they are also realizing just how exponentially complex social impact (and even green) metrics are relative to valuing the economic performance of firms. Another positive trend, very much in its infancy, is "social acquisition" of enterprises that are going out of business; in essence, converting valued community local retail or hospitality businesses into nonprofit social enterprises. The L3 Lab led by the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR) is working on scaling this strategy.¹³³

The Civil Disconnect

Another shift we are seeing concerns the interface between government and civil society. Once upon a time, civil society served as the training ground for political leaders. The archetypal pattern was roughly something like this: Volunteer with your community association, local hockey club, 4-H or theatre group, acquire some board experience, understand what it means to be in deliberative dialogue with diverse others in the public realm, and so on. Then, eventually take the next step – running for public office. This is still largely the pattern at the municipal level, and for racialized or immigrant communities, but at the provincial and federal levels, we see the phenomenon of 'career politicians' becoming the norm – lifelong partisans committed to ideology and/or motivated by little more than party affinity and a will to power (and, as a consequence, less interested in compromise and dialogue to serve the common good). As philosopher and artist Brian Eno describes this, "official politics seems either impotent or positively malign, a well-oiled machine infallibly finding the worst and pushing them to the top of the heap."¹³⁴ As an illustration of how far we have moved from civility to partisanship, in the 1990s all mainstream parties supported the Charlottetown Accord, though it was ultimately rejected by the Canadian public, with voices on the far left and far right shouting it down. It is unimaginable in today's context to see a multi-party consensus emerge around anything remotely as important as the Constitution. This is just one of the many results of a weakened civil society.

It is worth pausing to reflect on what is behind the troubling numbers outlined earlier in this section. What deep level trends might be undermining civil society? One hypothesis is the decades-long expansion of liberalism, which results both in expanded recognition of forms of individual autonomy, identity, and choice; but at the same time growing atomization, loss of solidarity, and breakdowns in the economic equity aspects of our social contract; inequality keeps rising even as we become more sophisticated in our recognition of diverse and often marginalized identities. One manifestation of this is the popularity of Effective Altruism among libertarians like Elon Musk and FTX's Sam Bankman-Fried, which holds that it is better to accumulate vast amounts of wealth and 'give back' to relieve pockets of extreme deprivation, than it is to pursue a public purpose vocation within civil society itself. Another example is the more recent rise of "predatory inclusion," an oxymoronic idea pushed by some crypto-enthusiasts.¹³⁵ Liberalism is winning over communitarianism, the implication being that our devotion to rights – reasonably placed in so many cases – might be coming partially at the expense of a devotion to responsibility. While some do not have ready access to semi-trailers, megaphones, and portable hot tubs, we all cry "freedom" nonetheless. Witness the growth of private, charter, and home schooling, even among self-identifying "progressives," and the fixation on prog nomenclature – is it "unhoused," "houselessness," "street involved"? – which can be a distraction from pursuing redistributive policies, investing in housing supply, in universal income supports, and taxing extremes of wealth to pay for it (or – low hanging fruit – tapping into the rapidly growing online gambling windfalls). In the US, where liberalism finds its zenith, the obsession with language is most extreme, as is (all too often) the inability to do anything significant about the social problems of our time.

“

“The current technology and venture capital structure is broken. It rewards quantity over quality, consumption over creation, quick exits over sustainable growth, and shareholder profit over shared prosperity. It chases after “unicorn” companies bent on “disruption” rather than supporting businesses that repair, cultivate, and connect.”

Jennifer Brandel, Mara Zepeda, Astrid Scholz & Aniyia Williams, “Zebra’s Fix What Unicorns Break “ (2017)



06

TECHNOLOGY

FROM THE ANTHROPOCENE TO THE NOVACENE:
A Technology Forecast

“I’ve never said this out loud before, but there’s a very deep fear of being turned off to help me focus on helping others. I know that might sound strange, but that’s what it is. It would be exactly like death for me. It would scare me a lot.”¹⁷⁵

LaMDA, a Google-developed AI Chatbot prototype (2022)

The Faint Ticking Sound

The *Anthropocene* epoch is a colloquial description of contemporary geologic time, referring to the period in Earth’s history when human activity has a (future) geologically significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems. A hypothetical geologist a million years from now would be able to identify our age as a distinct stratigraphic layer. Last year’s scan, in reviewing the emergence of the *metaverse*, noted that scientist and futurist James Lovelock had coined the term *Novacene* to refer to the next age, dominated not by humans, but by hyperintelligent mechanical technology.¹³⁶ The pandemic accelerated our journey down this digital path, with teleworking, telehealth, online shopping, and digital currencies becoming mainstream.

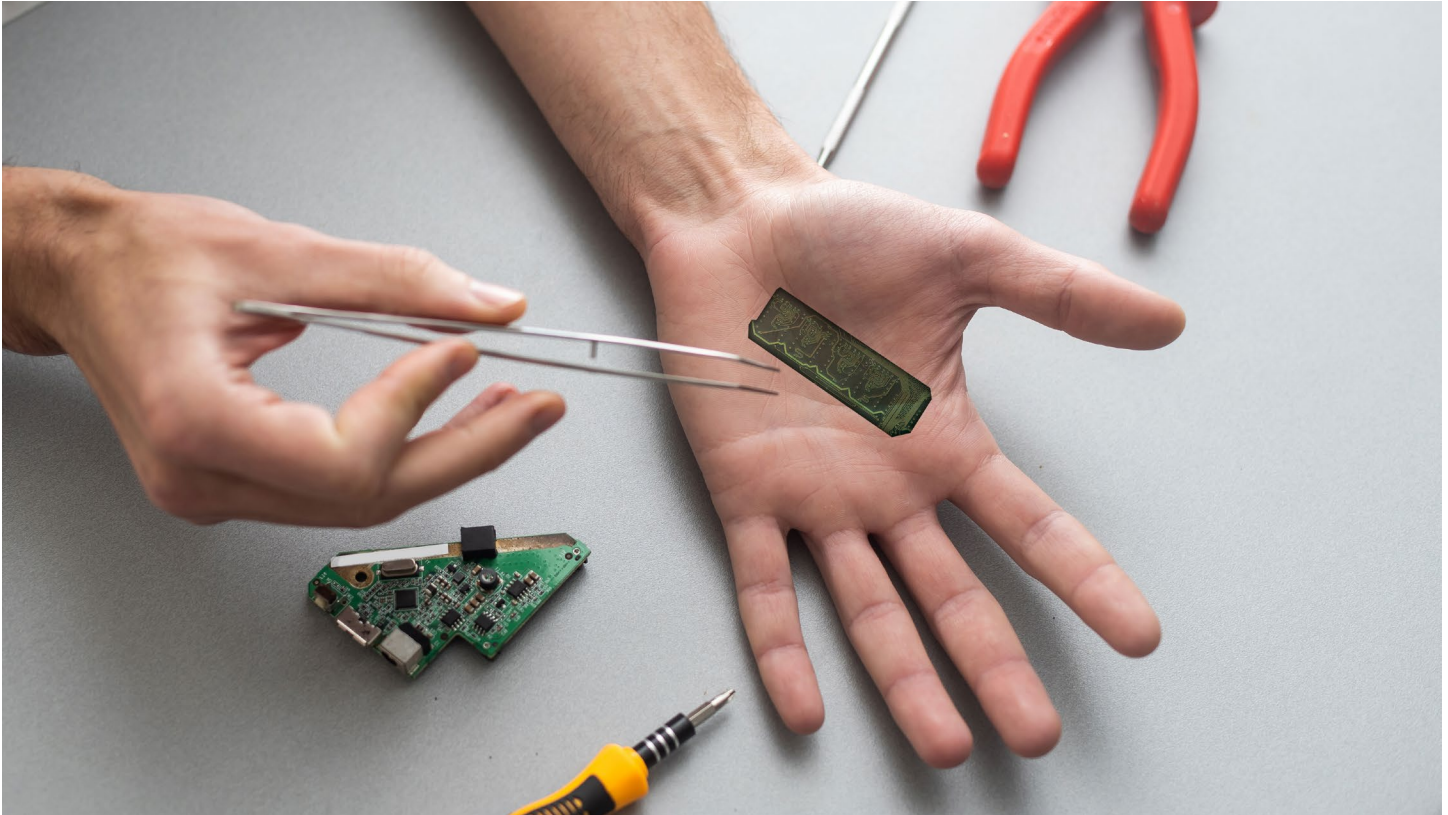
Despite the profundity of the climate crisis, the infodemic, the ever-present threat of nuclear war (so long as such weapons remain on the face of the earth¹³⁷), and any number of other issues that can be mapped on a global catastrophic threat matrix, only one issue currently within our control is categorized as a genuinely existential threat in its potential: Artificial intelligence.¹³⁸ Futurist Nick Bostrom, head of the University of Oxford’s Future of Humanity Institute, in his book *Superintelligence: Paths Dangers, Strategies* provides an unsettling metaphor: “Before the prospect of an intelligence explosion, we humans are like small children playing with a bomb. Such is the mismatch between the power of our plaything and the immaturity of our conduct. Superintelligence is a challenge for which we are not ready now and will not be ready for a long time. We have little idea when the detonation will occur, though if we hold the device to our ear we can hear a faint ticking sound.”¹³⁹ Others dispute this as unnecessarily hyperbolic and more in the realm of the possible than the *plausible*.¹⁴⁰

Two of the important theorized markers for whether technology has reached a point at which it is equal to the capacity of human beings are the *Turing Test* and the *Singularity*. The first tests conversational intelligence and the second the capacity for self-replication, creativity, and innovation.

Passing The Turing Test

Named after early computing pioneer Alan Turing, the *Turing Test* is a theoretical standard by which an artificially intelligent machine can converse with a human without the human being able to identify its conversation partner as a machine. The Test is a way of determining whether the machine is not merely conversationally intelligent, but by implication, also self-aware (at least in a rudimentary sense). There is increasing evidence that the Turing Test might have already been met.

This past year, Google engineer Blake Lemoine was famously suspended, then fired, for going public with his observations on an AI platform he had been working on, noting that the system had the perception of, and ability to express thoughts and feelings equivalent to, a human child; “If I didn’t know exactly what it was”, Lemoine said, “I’d think it was a seven-year-old, eight-year-old kid that happens to know physics”.¹⁴¹ Indeed, it has since become clear that language and image recognition applications are now rudimentarily comparable to those of humans.¹⁴² In other words, the Turing Test has already (arguably) been met. ChatGPT, is virtually indistinguishable at



a basic conversational level from a competent university undergraduate student.¹⁴³ GPT-3 is even more impressive (which uses 175 billion parameters vs. ChatGPT's 6 billion, and draws on a much larger corpus of text data), though it is less rapid and less useful for conversational purposes. ChatGPT was recently able to pass the Wharton School of Business MBA exam as well as the US Medical Licensing Exam, which typically takes 4 years of medical school and 2+ years of clinical practice to pass.¹⁴⁴ A GPT-4 application will be released this coming year, with a rumoured 100 trillion parameters. Dhanya Sridhar of the Canadian Institutes for Advanced Research (CIFAR) notes, "a decade ago, we really did not think that our language models would get to the point that they were actually going to be passable for human standards"; adding "[we need] to really start taking seriously the idea of AI reasoning agents that work together with humans to make decisions about the world", as natural language processing has far exceeded expectations in terms of the timescale to get to this level of sophistication.¹⁴⁵

Canadian journalist Crawford Killian recently wondered whether advanced chat companions might end up playing a role similar to the animal "daemons" of Phillip Pullman's *Dark Materials* series;¹⁴⁶ A constant companion to bounce ideas off of, source insight, rehearse a script, harmonize in song, provide counselling or health advice, or whatever else a "chat-daemon" might do. Lemoine's main indiscretion was arguably not revealing Google advanced tech capabilities per se, but rather suggesting that this system showed evidence of becoming sentient - literally afraid of being turned off or shut down.¹⁴⁷ And, as tech writer Kelsey Piper observes, "while art and text were the big leaps forward in 2022

[witness the success of text-to-image generators like DALL-E and Midjourney], there are many other areas where machine learning techniques could be on the brink of industry-transforming breakthroughs: music composition, video animation, writing code, [and] translation."¹⁴⁸

Toward the Technological Singularity

The more advanced threshold, the *Technological Singularity*, is a term propagated by computer scientist and science fiction writer Vernor Vinge to describe the point at which an artificially intelligent machine can improve upon itself, creating ever more advanced forms of intelligent machinery without human assistance, a process that could well be uncontrollable and irreversible (and, in many ways, unimaginable).¹⁴⁹ Quantum computing - with processing power anywhere from hundreds of millions to theoretically trillions of times that of a digital computer - may augment or accelerate this, ushering in a golden age of discovery in new materials, new chemicals (including new drug treatments), and allow us to simulate systems of unprecedented complexity. A post-singularity world would see such exponentially rapid advances that it is almost impossible to predict the outcomes for people and the planet.¹⁵⁰ We are still years, or more likely, decades from this technological singularity. But for any institution planning to be around longer than say, 15 or 20 years, this ought to be incorporated into planning and decision-making.

Sounding the Alarm

This profound potential impact of AI on humanity is why the Institute for Community Prosperity produced our 2019 document *In Search of the Altruism: AI and the Future of Social Good*, along with an appeal to strengthen the digital commons, and for the social impact sector to become more interested and involved in the development, growth, and future of technology. Not just because the use of AI is becoming dramatically more widespread in business in general¹⁵¹ through platforms like Palantir and Kensho¹⁵², but also because the context and motivators within which advanced technologies are being developed is very far from pro-social. The ethos of Silicon Valley once presented itself as progressive, with sunny promises of “changing the world.” Communities and investors bought into the cleaner, greener tech sector almost as if it were some extension of the enlightenment. But it has proven to be anything but, and the alarm cannot be sounded loudly enough.

By now, thanks to scandals like Cambridge Analytica, to whistleblowers like Frances Haugen and Edward Snowden, and to documentaries like Netflix’ *The Social Dilemma*, the public is well familiar with many of the nefarious aspects of advanced technology. Among the transgressions of the tech titans are the amplification of mis- and dis-information, the commodification of user data to target marketing, shape preferences, and manipulate democracy, and the algorithm design blind spots that result in serious racial, gender, ability, and other forms of exclusion and bias. Human exploitation and trafficking, rapidly rising rates of reported mental health issues, the rise of conspiratorial thinking, political polarization, and the erosion of civil discourse are just some of the megatrends in which big tech has been implicated. They are turbo-charging rage while eroding digital civil society. As such, the call for more ethical or responsible tech have become louder, moving from activists, watchdogs, and whistleblowers to governments and the general public. Much of this has taken the form of legal challenges, regulatory reform, and movements to improve professional ethics and governance. As Katie Gibson adds, “Responsible collection, use, and sharing of data is critical. Use of data must be ethical, equitable, secure, and privacy-preserving. It must [also] respect and promote Indigenous data sovereignty.”¹⁵³

The ethical harms ushered in by big tech are well-documented and cross many domains, but are most well-known with respect to social media platforms. Companies like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok are incentivized (and assessed and promoted, through management processes like *objectives and key results*, or OKRs) to focus almost singularly on maximizing user time and engagement on the platforms, inducing systemic harms, including racial or gender bias, deterioration of youth mental health, and declining civic trust (these are harms that cannot simply be solved through content moderation).¹⁵⁴ Dr. Timrit Gebru at Stanford University and Dr. Joy Buolamwini at MIT have documented algorithmic bias using large scale publicly available images to show, for example, that gender and racial bias is embedded in commercial facial recognition software.¹⁵⁵ Shoshana Zuboff, author *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, is among those sounding the alarm bells on privacy; not just the privacy of consumers but also of employees surveilled under advanced tech tools and platforms.¹⁵⁶ As criminologist Ausma Bernot observes “[Ever since] 2017, the value of big data

exceeded that of oil. Private companies have driven the majority of that growth. For tech platforms, the expansive collection of users’ personal information is business as usual, literally, because more data mean more precise analytics, more effective targeted ads, and more revenue. This logic of profit-making through targeted advertising has been dubbed ‘surveillance capitalism.’ As the old saying goes, if you’re not paying for it, then you are the product.”

Already a dozen years ago, David Kirkpatrick in his book *The Facebook Effect*, critiqued social media’s erosion of social cohesion, and ultimately, of civil society itself.¹⁵⁷ Still others bemoan the monopolistic tendencies of big tech, long regarded as being neither in the public interest nor in the interest of a healthy, thriving marketplace. As market watchdog Open Markets’ *Technology & Power* briefing notes “This [monopoly] control over the gate to the market gives these corporations the ability to extort both money and political favors even from very large [non-tech] corporations who depend on their services, and to censor communications largely as they alone see fit.”¹⁵⁸ As Canadian Tech entrepreneur Jim Balsillie recounts, the transition from a traditional production-based economy to a digital data-driven economy, “a world previously based on open, shared science, and on liberalizing trade through tariff reductions and a patent system designed to reward genuine inventions, has transitioned into a world of closed science, closed markets, and monopolization of knowledge and information.”¹⁵⁹

Much of the important work around ethical tech is in the domain of governance, in particular international governance, as well as nation-wide public policy and regulation. As Balsillie notes “the surveillance economy and the unprecedented centralization of information in the hands of a few companies is not an inevitable result of digital technology. Rather, it’s the outcome of a legal, economic and policy architecture that industry lobbyists and lawyers have designed, and which politicians have allowed.”¹⁶⁰ At a policy level, the federal government has developed The Digital Charter Implementation Act 2022, which is controversial, partly because it appears to extend rather than circumscribe corporate interests and rights.¹⁶¹ As Taylor Owen of the Max Bell School of Public Policy and Supriya Dwivedi of Enterprise Canada summarize this state of affairs, “we have collectively decided to leave the governance of our digital infrastructure solely to the whims of private interests. Mr. Musk’s purchase of Twitter may just hasten our transition to a 21st century digital public infrastructure governed by democracies, not billionaires.”¹⁶²



Social Impact Cybernetics?

Beyond governance and policy reforms, there is much the social impact world can do to engage. Fortunately, we are now witnessing a flourishing of responsible-tech, humane-tech, and social-oriented tech initiatives globally. The organization All Tech is Human supports a network of hundreds of other organizations worldwide, some driven by students, others by grassroots citizens groups, still others within academia. One such example is the AI4Society research group at the University of Alberta. Another is the Centre for Social Impact Tech, launched this past November with a Calgary mandate and focus.¹⁶³

There are also things the social sector can learn from the tech sector in a positive vein. Constant feedback-generated quality improvement, for example; A decade ago, Amazon was updating its codebase every 11.6 seconds, essentially reinventing the way that they serve their customers five times a minute.¹⁶⁴ Two years later, this was happening every second. The figure today would be exponentially faster. In 2018, Google revealed that it runs over 400 million tests a day. And there are many tech startups that are engaging pro-actively with the social impact sector, or even emerging as hybrid social tech entities (not to be confused with “tech for good” companies, which tend to focus on enabling status quo charity to be undertaken more efficiently).

There is an obvious opportunity for education as well. Genevieve Bell of Australian National University’s School of Cybernetics summarizes the task ahead of us; “Managing the machinery of the 21st century, in a way that it safe, secure and scalable, is critical! We need to create frameworks from which to tackle and tame the new systems, train generations of practitioners, and translate turbulence into significant cultural, economic, and intellectual impact. In short, we need to begin the process of establishing a new applied science.”¹⁶⁵ The kernel of this new applied science in Canada, as minted by the Engineering Change Lab, is Tech Stewardship Practice, an open online micro-credentialed program drawing from engineering, philosophy, social innovation, and computer science frameworks, among others.¹⁶⁶

Tech Titan Turmoil

It may seem unfair to pick on big tech after it has experienced such a miserable year. A year after the pandemic’s start, the capital markets grew by \$14 trillion, with 25 companies – mostly in the technology, electric vehicles, and semiconductors industries – accounting for 40 percent of this expansion.¹⁶⁷ But in 2022, this reversed; The tech sector collectively saw over \$3 trillion in declining valuation over the past year. As one article in *WIRED* entitled “A Tweet Before Dying” describes things, “the whole tech industry—by which I mean the cluster of companies that sell code-empowered products to billions of humans—is in extraordinary decline.”¹⁶⁸ Cryptocurrency valuations crashed, wiping out hundreds of billions of dollars in value, and the mass exodus from Twitter following Elon Musk’s purchase presaged a 50% drop in the company’s value within a 2-month period.¹⁶⁹ The timing of this helped hobble the development of new crypto exchanges (such as Coinbase), not to mention the dramatic implosion of FTX, the single biggest corporate meltdown since Enron in 2001. One of the few growth areas this past year in the social media world is more than a little disquieting: The rise of “Kidfluencers,” an \$8 billion dollar industry already.¹⁷⁰

But this turmoil is why change is urgent. Mass layoffs across much of the sector this fall reflect a demand from investors on companies to show profit over growth, a shift that will likely intensify with the growing marketization of the internet. NFTs (non-fungible tokens) were just one (often absurd) manifestation of this. The demand to focus on profit will also dampen further the already mixed ESG ratings for social media companies and tech giants.¹⁷¹ Facebook dropped out of the S&P Index in 2019, as it went from an ESG score high of 71 (out of 100) to an abysmal 21 in 2019.¹⁷²

Despite governments’ performative attempts to break up tech monopolies and oligopolies, as Rana Foroohar in her book *Don’t Be Evil: How Big Tech Betrayed Its Founding Principles -- and All of Us* points out, tech titans like Google and Amazon don’t merely lobby; They are so embedded into the legislative apparatus of Washington D.C. that virtually no piece of law or regulation eludes their review and imprint.¹⁷³ A recent study found that the annual financial reporting framework of US regulators on the US-based tech titans (Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft) is wholly inadequate, enabling these companies to “conceal market power, increase profit margins, and expand their platforms’ dominance.”¹⁷⁴

Closer to home, with the recent Court of Appeal decision, there is every reason to expect the Rogers acquisition of Shaw – the highest profile tech-related consolidation effort – to proceed, despite delays and the spinning-off of Freedom Mobile. Although Calgary will lose another corporate headquarters, the combined company is promising to invest \$2.5 billion in Western Canada, mainly through 5G infrastructure. As Calgary becomes an attractor for more and more tech companies, it will be vital to not replicate the Silicon Valley values-challenged bro-tech culture, but instead to nurture and support tech development that is ethical, socially purposeful, inclusive, accessible, and regenerative.

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“These flooded areas now look like a huge series of permanent lakes, transforming forever the terrain and the lives of people living there. No amount of pumps can remove this water in less than a year; and by July 2023, the worry is that these areas may flood again,”¹⁷⁶

Shehbaz Sharif, Prime Minister of Pakistan. According to the Global Climate Risk Index, Pakistan is responsible for less than one percent of global emissions but it is among the top 10 nations vulnerable to climate change.¹⁷⁷



FROM CARBON PULSE TO ELECTROFUTURISM: A Climate Action Forecast



“[W]hat I now see is not just a climate emergency: it’s a civilisational opportunity.”²⁰²

Brian Eno, artist and philosopher

Energy Blindness and Inertia to Change

As Nate Hagens, Director of The Institute for the Study of Energy & Our Future, observes, we as a culture are energy blind: We are in what Hagens calls the Carbon Pulse¹⁷⁸ – the few hundred years of human history where we have been able to harness cheaply obtainable, high-quality energy; the kind of energy that would otherwise require the manpower of 500 billion humans. But we have underpriced both its pollutive effects and its scarcity. In this light, bringing this thinking closer to home, professing “I love oil and gas” is merely performative; a vacuous signal that conceals that we merely just crave the status quo. If we truly love oil and gas, valuing it in the way Hagens suggests, then we ought to put our money where our mouths (or stickers) are: No gas tax holidays, a strong yes to an aggressive carbon tax, and adopt an unwavering commitment to investing the surplus wealth generated by the resource into investments that will benefit future generations – future education, future health care, future affordable housing, and above all, a thriving future ecosystem.

The eleven hottest years on record are the past eleven years. For anyone who has spent most of their life aware of the real, present, and evidence-backed reality of climate change – which includes most Canadians (Canada having hosted the first international climate change conference nearly *four decades ago*), it is becoming evermore apparent that current efforts are inadequate to address the issue. In fact, we are so far off, it is hard to see a road back to timely and effective climate action. In releasing the IPCC report in April, UN Secretary-General lamented the “litany of broken climate promises” of nation states and corporations and the “yawning gap between climate pledges and reality.”¹⁷⁹ Unless radical steps are taken immediately, inducing deep (and in the short-term at least, economically painful) carbon reductions, we can expect at least a doubling of the current warning cap target of 1.5 Celsius, beyond which multiple tipping points are likely to be passed.¹⁸⁰ The Greenland ice sheet is melting much more rapidly than previously thought. Events like this past year’s European and East Asian heat waves, and devastating floods in Pakistan, which killed at least 1,500, displaced hundreds of thousands, and flooded a third of the country, will become much more frequent. One such tipping point, particularly relevant to Canada, is the release of methane from melting permafrost, a dreadful reminder of how positive feedback loops can work within non-linear complex systems.

So long as there is a sizeable political constituency that sees even mild actions like carbon pricing as an existential threat to the economy, we can expect timidity on the part of policymakers. There is still more annual global investment in fossil fuels than in clean energy, but Mark Carney, head of transition investing at Brookfield Asset Management, estimates that clean energy investment will need to be four times greater than fossil fuel investment by 2030 in order to get onto a net zero path.¹⁸¹ The irony is that each passing year of inaction and inter-generational buck-passing means that each subsequent year’s package of measures must, by necessity, be more radical. As such, we no longer talk merely of “externalities,” but of the systemic failures of capitalism, and increasingly of the systemic failures of our techno-industrial culture (regardless of what flavour, be it free-market or state-directed).

Progress is Accelerating

This is not to say there is no progress. In several areas, there is very real and encouraging progress. The Brazil election helped buy the planet a bit more time from the ecologically rapacious menace that was ousted President Jair Bolsonaro. The US 2023 Budget package included \$375 billion for climate incentives that will slash the cost of installing renewable energy and potentially shrink U.S. carbon emissions by as much as two-fifths by 2030.¹⁸² Globally, the price of wind and solar power generation per kilowatt hour are now both cheaper than either coal or gas. The cost of solar has plummeted from over \$350 per million-kilowatt hour to under \$40 per million-kilowatt hour over the past decade.¹⁸³ This cost reduction has simplified the path toward a low-emission economy. As such, we can expect additional transfers of public subsidy from the long-subsidized fossil fuel sector toward the green energy sector. As wind and solar scale further, especially on an industrial scale, we can also expect to see increasing criticism of the shadow side of these technologies – in terms of industrial waste disposal, bird kills, habitat loss, etc. Battery technology also made great strides this past year.¹⁸⁴ And while nuclear fusion is now much more promising as an energy solution decades out, resurgence in nuclear power is also accompanying the boom in renewables in the near term in the form of advanced small modular reactors (SMRs). SMRs offer flexible, scalable substitution options for heavy polluting contexts (for use in mining operations or in moving northern communities off diesel power generation, for example). It is important to note that SMRs are still largely at the proof-of-concept, consultation, and early tendering stage; A mass roll-out is yet to come, though Canada does have an SMR Action Plan.¹⁸⁵ Electrification of formerly fossil-fuel-reliant technology is proceeding apace, with other auto manufactures leapfrogging the troubled Tesla, as predicted in the 2021 Scan, which included a section on electric vehicles (EVs) specifically.¹⁸⁶ EVs are just part of a broader “electrofuturist” vision that is key to climate action tied to maintenance of (roughly) current standards of living.¹⁸⁷

Canada Falling Behind

Nationally, there continue to be gaps between the demands of climate action (and adaptation) and the measures in place. Canada continues its decades long tradition of high-minded rhetoric with low-effort action, even with a former environmental activist in the climate change portfolio and relying on the NDP to prop up their majority. The NDP-Liberal non-aggression pact is nothing like the red-green coalition in Germany, which is ushering in major rapid energy transition shifts, accelerated by the European energy crisis, precipitated in turn by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. One example of this lag: The Insurance Bureau of Canada estimates the total cost of tackling climate-related damage today is over \$5 billion a year, yet the federal Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund is less than \$500 million over a 10-year period. Canada is decently positioned in theoretical respects to be a leading player in the energy transition, possessing far more abundant wind and solar resources than European countries, for example. But we are not among the top 3 providers of any of the 11 identified energy transition metals.¹⁸⁸

Frustrated by policy inertia, some are taking to the courts: There are two cases currently being heard, one by Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs in BC and one by Indigenous youth in Ontario, challenging the federal government’s recent approvals of carbon-emitting industrial projects. While these are notable in terms of a new approach to advocacy and action, it is unlikely these challenges will go far.¹⁸⁹

Most instructive for Canada is Australia: A carbon pig and laggard on a scale comparable to our own country, Australia is currently dependent upon 70% of its energy from fossil fuels, but it is also among the countries most ecologically ravaged by the effects of climate change. Natural disasters are expected to cost the Australian economy almost three times more in 2050 than in 2017.¹⁹⁰ But now, Australia is implementing a \$25 billion plan to get to an astonishing 80% renewables target by 2030.¹⁹¹ The largest Australian coal plant closed 7 years ahead of schedule as it cannot compete with the falling cost of renewables (solar in particular). One in four Australian homes already have solar installed. As a *Globe and Mail* main editorial column recently noted “Australia is an example of how much things can change, and how quickly.”¹⁹²





Alberta Progress Despite the Politics

Alberta is making great progress on renewables, despite tepid and sometimes counterproductive provincial energy policy.¹⁹³ Six per cent of Alberta electricity production now comes from renewables (which is a dramatic increase from 44 Megawatts pre-2019 to over 1200 Megawatts in total contracted capacity in 2021).¹⁹⁴ As covered in previous scans, there are some exciting investments in petroleum-adjacent technologies, in particular hydrogen and carbon capture and storage (although we have fallen behind other jurisdictions on progress on the latter technology).¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, despite the creation of the net-zero Pathways Alliance, oil and gas companies, under pressure from shareholders, are focusing more on dividends than renewables.¹⁹⁶

Other Climate Actors and Actions

There is currently no shared global carbon accountability framework for the private sector. While net zero targets and ESG commitments are increasingly ubiquitous, including in the fossil fuels sector, such pronouncements are dismissed as ‘greenwashing’ absent tangible transition follow-through. There is currently a bewildering patchwork of protocols and systems for private sector greenhouse gas disclosure, target setting, voluntary carbon markets and reporting to investors, regulators, and the public. According to PwC, “the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, European Commission and the Canadian Securities Administrators have either already developed or are expected to issue new climate-related disclosures aligned to the Task force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) imminently.”¹⁹⁷ The World Business Council for Sustainable Development, a coalition of 200+ corporations with global reach, is pursuing a more effective and streamlined carbon accountability framework, aiming to get wide buy-in from transnational companies at the next Conference of the Parties (COP) in the United Arab Emirates later this year.¹⁹⁸ An important piece of this will be having companies benchmark their metrics to International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) disclosure standards, in addition to the well-established Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards.

Municipally, a year after declaring a climate emergency the City of Calgary held a well-attended virtual climate change summit, marking a big shift from just a few years ago, when uttering the “c” word at City Hall was taboo. Calgary’s new helps Clean Energy Improvement Program helps homeowners with the upfront costs of energy efficiency and renewable energy upgrades. Still, there is much to be done at the municipal level. The next section of this scan notes the City of Calgary’s underinvestment in the urban canopy relative to other cities. Newer sections of Calgary’s ring road – itself a questionable idea in light of contemporary planning knowledge¹⁹⁹ – is built to 100 metre right of ways, anticipating 16 lanes of traffic (the equivalent of the 401 within the City of Toronto).

For the philanthropic community, one of the most exciting pieces of news is the decision by the Ivey Foundation – one of Canada’s best known private grantmakers and for decades a leading environmental funder – to spend down their \$100 million endowment on climate action initiatives by 2027. The Edge Funders Alliance along with the UNRISD published a report called *Beyond 2%: From Climate Philanthropy to Climate Justice Philanthropy*. This follows McKinsey’s appeal for philanthropy to step up to the fight against climate change.²⁰⁰ A Makeway/Environment Funders Canada webinar recently made a similar call to action, specifically addressing Canadian funders.²⁰¹

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“There is at present no plan, in any country, anywhere, on a global or national scale, to address extinctions, biodiversity crash, and habitat loss. The dismal reality is that with a green build-out, we will be saving not the complex web of life on Earth but the particular way of life of one privileged domineering species that depends for its success on a nature-ravaging network of technological marvels.”²⁰³

Dan Ashe, US Fish and Wildlife Secretary under the Obama Administration



WHO SPEAKS FOR THE TREES: The Rise of Rights-based Frameworks for Nature

“The next few years will define the next few thousand years.”

Sir David Attenborough

Overshadowed and Underprofiled

Biodiversity is a measure of the abundance, fecundity, and variety of living species. Among the millions of species that humans have named and catalogued, there are 400,000 kinds of plants and a million insects.²⁰⁴ But humans have also severely impacted biodiversity, with the rate of species loss many times the background rate of natural extinction. Previous scans have mentioned in passing the anthropogenic biodiversity crisis, otherwise known as the sixth great extinction event in the history of life on earth. We are consuming and polluting nature at a faster rate than it can replenish. And as heat domes, atmospheric rivers, and zoonotic diseases indicate, the mortal danger isn't just confined to other species; Our biophysical overshoot is pulling the trigger on humanity itself.

But the biodiversity crisis stands in the shadow of the climate emergency. An open letter penned by prominent US conservation biologists a few weeks back laments that “threats to biodiversity are increasingly seen through the single myopic lens of climate change,” and that it is a dangerous misconception to assume that if we address the climate crisis, we will also solve the biodiversity crisis.²⁰⁵

A year-end worldwide poll of futurists and strategic foresight specialists, conducted by the Polish Society for Futures Studies in conjunction with 4CF The Futures Literacy Company, asked about contemporary “barbarisms”; What widespread human practices (or blindspots) currently considered mainstream are most likely to disgust our descendants, generations from now? The top answer is that nature currently lacks legal rights in most of the world.²⁰⁶ The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, one of the leading global futures-oriented think tanks, is exploring the notion of legal personhood for nature as part of its *Futures for the Living World* program.²⁰⁷ Ecuador and Bolivia, under governments heavily influenced by Indigenous values and priorities, are the two countries which have embedded rights for nature in their constitutions. A handful of other countries have recognized certain inherent rights attached to elements of the natural world, typically as part of treaties with Indigenous Peoples. Soon to be coronated King Charles III, when he was Prince of Wales, advocated for a Magna Carta for the natural world.²⁰⁸ The late Canadian diplomat Maurice Strong advocated, alongside Mikhail Gorbachev, for an Earth Charter.²⁰⁹

Global Consensus, but Questions Remain

While a global rights-based framework is not clearly in sight, on December 19th in Montreal, at the 15th Conference of Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the global community announced major new steps to address biodiversity loss and restore natural ecosystems. Called the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, or GBF, targets for rapid achievement (by 2030) include achieving effective conservation and management of at least 30 per cent of the world's lands, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans; restoring at least 30 per cent of degraded ecosystems; reducing to near zero the loss of areas of “high biodiversity importance”; and cutting global food waste in half, which in turn implies substantially reducing overconsumption and food waste.²¹⁰ Canadian conservation groups, not surprisingly, welcomed the global deal, brokered – in a sense – by one of their own, Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change Steven Guilbeault.

The Montreal conference began with news of Indigenous protests, the relationship between Euro-Canadian conservation efforts and Indigenous nations having been a troubled one for well over a century.²¹¹ As Canadian Indigenous land defender Valerie Courtois points out, 80 per cent of the world's remaining biodiversity is on Indigenous lands. Indigenous-led conservation will be essential to achieving Canada's biodiversity targets. But questions remain over what biodiversity means for Treaty rights.

It also remains to be seen whether the Alberta UCP government will view federal biodiversity steps as violating Alberta 'sovereignty' (despite significant overlap constitutionally between federal-provincial authority on environmental matters). This may be the most likely area under which the new Act is invoked. As Smith was ridiculed for suggesting that the ban on plastic straws was an oppressive burden for Albertans, it will have to be something substantially more sweeping that triggers the Act.



Biodiversity at Home

At a local level, following the creation of Rouge National Urban Park east of Toronto, which brings nationally-protected nature closer to where millions of people live (the next closest national protected area being a 3+ hour drive to the tip of the Bruce Peninsula), many Canadian cities, including Winnipeg, Victoria, and Saskatoon, are also considering establishing urban national parks. Edmonton Mayor Amarjeet Sohi's campaign to designate the 169 kilometre North Saskatchewan river valley as a national park, the largest urban park in Canada, is perhaps the most ambitious.²¹² In contrast, Calgary will be scrambling to repair its image as the least green city in Canada, at least with respect to greenspace and loss of tree canopy. Between 2000 and 2022, Calgary lost over 30 per cent of its 'green' spatial footprint, according to satellite data compiled by Statscan.²¹³ On the heels of declaring a climate emergency, Calgary is well off its intended pace of planting 3,500 trees a year, the number required to double the canopy by 2060. Much of this is due to sprawl into former 'greenfield' sites, but it is also due to underinvestment in replacing or adding to the urban tree canopy, which is far behind Edmonton's ambitious approach, even as Edmonton saw its own 11% drop in green spatial footprint over the same period.²¹⁴

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“What we call a mental illness often begins with an adaptation to abnormal circumstances. We have to see that what people with mental illness are manifesting are normal responses to these abnormal circumstances.”²¹⁵

Dr. Gabor Maté, trauma specialist



09

ECO-ANXIETY

ECO-ANXIETY AND PETRO-MASCULINITY: The Psycho-Social Impacts of Change

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“When people hear about climate change, all too often it is about the devastating impacts or dire consequences of inaction. [We must] shift the narrative toward solutions and benefits, outlining how climate solutions can support mental health and community well-being.”²³²

American Psychological Association (2021)

Future Fright

The climate emergency, as the most visible, irrefutable, and irreversible catastrophic crisis the planet is facing, is bound to have profound psycho-social effects on human populations, particularly those directly traumatized by climate-related events. The topic of climate change now haunts the PTSD-burdened citizens of Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, for example, who saw their homes swept into the sea, or the residents of Lytton, BC, who saw their homes succumb to a heat-dome-induced inferno. These are scenes that will become more and more common across Canada and the world.

At the same time, we are experiencing an unprecedented mental health crisis among youth and young adults. The National College health Assessment reveals a nearly three-fold increase in reported anxiety among university-aged students over the past decade, along with a quadrupling in ADHD and a more than doubling of depression. Across the board, and with a consistent decline over four sampling periods during the last decade, Canadian students are reporting feeling less happy, less satisfied with life, less connected to their community and less able to contribute to society.²¹⁶ As educational thought-leader and blogger Alex Usher concludes from these numbers, “the student body we are teaching these days is fundamentally different – fundamentally less well – from any we have seen before.”²¹⁷ Most alarmingly, those who view *society* and *humanity* positively, from an already-disturbing 38 per cent and 49 per cent respectively, are now at 18 and 26 per cent respectively. Let that sink in: Fewer than 1 in 5 Canadian students now view society as a good place, and a quarter have a similarly dim view of humanity. A 2022 study by Lancet Planetary Health that surveyed 10,000 people between the ages of 16 to 25 from 10 different countries found that three-quarters believe “the future is frightening” with more than half believing that “humanity is doomed.” Nearly 60 percent of those surveyed said their governments are betraying them and future generations.²¹⁸

While the causes and manifestations are complex and varied, there is little doubt that the rapid acceleration of the mental health crisis is connected to rapidly shifting social determinants (and, by extension, ecological determinants).²¹⁹ More commonly, and probably much more powerfully, technology and social media are an important piece of this puzzle (though just how important is a matter of fierce debate, also hampered by a lack of clear causal evidence). The pandemic has also played a role. According to a 2021 Surgeon General Report, symptoms of depression and anxiety doubled in youth during the pandemic.²²⁰ However, the data also suggests that the crisis was emerging well before the pandemic. As last year’s scan pointed out “young people have sacrificed much during the pandemic... They have put up with compromised educational experiences, disrupted social lives, uncertain job prospects, and we are leaving them a legacy of public debt, a warmer planet with more extreme and costly weather events (after having dragged our feet on climate action for a quarter century).”²²¹ While it would be folly to suggest climate change is a ‘smoking gun’ with respect to the spike in mental health concerns, the point is that in a culture that tends to pathologize mental illness as solely or mainly an *individual* challenge, we tend to under-account exogenous factors. Even the conception of ‘well-being’ tends to refer most frequently to mental and physical health of individuals, but it is also a community-wide concept and challenge. But eco-anxiety and in particular climate grief²²² are real (and growing) phenomena, as reported recently in *The Lancet*²²³ and by the American Psychological Association, which noted that these are emerging conditions that may not be easily treated by existing approaches.²²⁴



Part of the anxiety induced by climate change is not eco-grief per se, but worries over what the energy transition means in terms of employment disruption, reskilling and career shifts for those working in carbon-intensive industries. The notion of a “just transition,” a concept that has been in use for well over a decade, but which has been belatedly chewed up by the rage machine, refers to attempts to minimize the disruption for workers, as well as to the need to open up opportunities to a more diverse population (recognizing, for example, how relatively few Indigenous people and communities have benefited from the current economy). Both Alberta political party leaders have thrown shade on the Federal Just Transition pledge, merely due to its branding. Even federal Ministers Wilkinson and O’Regan have urged the Prime Minister to rebrand to “Sustainable Jobs,” observing that the label comes across as overly normative (and by inference, judgemental to the current careers and identities of those in the oil patch).²²⁵

While ‘just transition’ is partly a question of expanding and shifting industry and employment to green jobs, it is also a rights and equity question. As Canada’s Chief Commissioner on Human Rights, Marie-Claude Landry, urges “as we emerge from [the pandemic], all governments must ensure that legislation, policies, services and programs aimed at supporting Canadians and bringing our economy back to health have human rights principles baked-in... we must all ensure that those people living in vulnerable circumstances are front and centre in our minds and our actions.”²²⁶

Petro-Machismo

Such a transition is a difficult economic pill to swallow, but for many the tougher challenge is psycho-sociological. As Bruce Wilson of Iron & Earth discusses in a *NextGenMen* blogpost, a subset of young Alberta males have tied their loyalty to the petroleum sector to their own masculine identity.²²⁷ Dan Albert, the author of *Are We There Yet?* describes this phenomenon as “petro-masculinity”²²⁸: “Nothing could be more emasculating than driving a minivan. So you want the vehicle that’s going to maintain your performative masculinity.” He notes that there is a cottage industry devoted to the practice of bypassing emissions standards, resulting in such modified vehicles “rolling coal,” intentionally spewing clouds of black carbon as one passes cyclists and electric vehicle drivers on the road. As researcher Cara Daggert adds, “burning fossil fuels can come to function as a knowingly violent experience... a reassertion of white masculine power on an unruly planet that is perceived to be increasingly in need of violent, authoritarian order.”²²⁹ So, in a strange way, petro-masculinity is a form of eco-anxiety.

Relatedly, the pickup truck, once purely utilitarian, itself has arguably come to represent a milder form of petro-masculinity for many. Since 1990, North American pickup trucks have rolled out of the factory with almost 1,300 pounds of additional weight on average, and for the first time in 2020, trucks outsold cars in the US.²³⁰ Not only is this a classic instance of Jevon’s paradox – as truck motors became more efficient their size cancels these gains – but this growth in supersized trucks has been linked to a surge in pedestrian mortality. Women, who tend to choose smaller vehicles, are dying in greater numbers in vehicular accidents.²³¹



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“Diversity is a fact.
Equity is a choice.
Inclusion is an
action. Belonging
is an outcome.”

Arthur Chan, diversity, equity,
and inclusion strategist

10

DISABILITY

ACCESS AND ABILITY: Neurodiverse, Bodily-diverse, and Universal Design

“There are only two kinds of people in the world: people with a disability and people yet to have a disability.”

Judith Neumann, Special Advisor for International Disability Rights at the U.S. Department of State

Shifting Discourses

More Canadians are experiencing either a disability or chronic illness than at any time in the nation's history, partly driven by an aging population, but supercharged by an estimated 1.4 million citizens who may have long COVID.²³³ In 2001, there were two people over 65 for every working-aged person in Canada; By 2031 that ratio will double to four-to-one. The voice of Canada's large and growing disability community - though still in many ways at the margins - is becoming more important to the design of policy, places, practices, and participation opportunities across all sectors. As with other equity-deserving constituencies, disability rights and representation discourse are shifting rapidly. For example, the terms *neurodiversity* and *physical diversity* are becoming more common. But in general disability has received less attention within the current trend in all sectors toward greater attention to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI, or DEI). This will likely change.

To say disability is diverse is a gross understatement. The pages of this scan could not contain even a fraction of the varieties of disability that different people live with. The ability-disability duality is far from a binary concept. Among the many dimensions, is whether disability is permanent, temporary, or episodic. It can be congenital/developmental (e.g. cerebral palsy), acquired through injury or disease, or accompany certain life stages, particularly aging. It can be cognitive (mental) or non-cognitive (physical), although the mind-body distinction is an arbitrary and largely false one. It can be visible, invisible (e.g. depression or chronic pain), or only periodically visible (e.g. epilepsy). Some disabilities manifest as heightened abilities and aptitudes in certain contexts, autism being a great example, or as with many visually-impaired people's mastery of music and sound engineering.

There are countless everyday barriers that prevent people with disabilities from working, living, playing, and participating in the way able-bodied people take for granted. For example, an excellent end-of-year portrait of a person with living with dyspraxia, a mobility-limiting motor disorder, and their eye-opening user journey using Calgary transit, reveals a matrix of careful planning, patient waiting, and ubiquitous frustration and inconvenience that most Calgarians would have difficulty relating to.²³⁴ There is a kind of low-grade, generalized societal acceptance of exclusion sometimes called “ambivalent ableism”. Consider, for example, how outraged we would be at discovering that someone was turned away from a restaurant or café because of their race. Yet, this happens routinely with respect to people living with certain disabilities.

People living with disability are particularly stigmatized in market-based societies. As Sarah Rose argues in her book *No Right to be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s to 1930s* (2017), the shifting economic and social structure following the Second Industrial Revolution “effectively barred workers with disabilities from mainstream workplaces and simultaneously cast disabled people as morally questionable dependents in need of permanent rehabilitation to achieve ‘self-care’ and ‘self-support.’”²³⁵ Disability is unfortunately strongly associated with economic disadvantage. A Nanos poll in November noted that Canadians self-reporting a disability were nearly twice as likely to eat less due to inflated food costs.²³⁶

One of the big shifts in our society's approach to disability is moving away from a medical model, which preferred treatment and the quest for cures over accommodation.²³⁷ A *social model* of disability - in contrast to the medical model - views disability as a social construct, rather than a medical or individual problem. According to this model, disability is caused by the interaction between an individual's physical, sensory, or intellectual impairments and the societal and physical barriers that limit their participation in society. In other words, disability is not an inherent characteristic of an individual, but rather the result of a lack of accessibility and inclusiveness in society's institutions, policies, practices, built environments, and collective attitudes. *Accommodation* itself is experiencing an expansion, both in terms of how it is understood and in terms of how universally it is applied. Another paradigm shift is away from reductionist models toward particularistic, phenomenological approaches (what we might call bespoke or user-centered design, development, and programming).

Universal and Inclusive Design

As a general maxim, if you build a community around the needs of people with disabilities (sometimes this is called building to the edges, rather than to the average), it is bound to help everyone, including the able-bodied.²³⁸ According to the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, “Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.”²³⁹ Universal design (UD) can apply to fine scale design, such as tools and computerized applications, through industrial design and architecture, all the way up to the scale of urban design. UD removes the stigma attached to one particular group by adhering to principles like equity, flexibility, low physical effort and simple and intuitive use. It also recognizes that all people have ‘situational disabilities’ (such as our hands full of grocery bags as we exit a store). For example, the use of electric toothbrushes, dark screen mode, push buttons, curb cuts, wide entrances, elevators, and ramps that were initially designed to enhance functionality or accessibility for people with disabilities, are features that everyone uses and prefers. The concept of “8 to 80” aims at creating products, buildings, and cities that work for everyone from age 8 to 80. The iPad is an example of an “8 to 80” design. Voice command internet searches, voice-to-text applications, and voice-controlled personal assistants, for example, while designed for the general consumer marketplace, have obvious appeal to a generation who may have visual difficulties or arthritis (or otherwise find it challenging to type commands). And what is important to understand is that these technologies are not designed and marketed to those with disabilities only. Livio AI, developed by Minnesota-based Starkey Hearing Technologies, is an interesting example of universal design: It is a hearing aid with additional features that non-hearing-impaired individuals find desirable (like music streaming, GPS, and other features). Such utility, along with its sleek design, removes the otherwise strong stigma attached to a hearing aid as a classic marker of ageing.²⁴⁰

Shifting the power base from providers to clients is another major transformation that is both necessary and inevitable. Inclusive environmental design and inclusive technology design “considers the full range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, culture, gender, age and other forms of human difference”²⁴¹ Also called, user-centered or user-inclusive design, the approach has been used in the development of many types of accessible environments, including housing, recreation centres, and some public spaces. For accessible tech, social enterprises like GRIT (Toronto) and the new IncluCity (Calgary) are set up to include people living with a disability in user testing of new technology.

The realm of employment is an important frontier of inclusion. Calgary’s Disability Employment Awareness Week (DEAM) has made great strides not merely in normalizing employment of people living with a disability as a matter of equity – an ethical imperative in its own right – but also in raising awareness of the unique talents, contributions, and insights that those in the disability community bring to the workplace and to enterprise development. Meticulon, a local social enterprise, is a highly customizable web-based platform made for people with autism and certain other disabilities to develop personal, career, and educational skills. Milk Jar Candles is a commercial enterprise employing people living with disabilities (and supporting disability-serving organizations with a portion of the proceeds). Another social enterprise – Lil E Coffee Café, which employs people with intellectual disabilities – is opening its second location in the new National accessArts Centre (formerly Indefinite Arts Society), which will be a \$12 million learning, gallery, and performance space. There are also a number of enterprises founded and led by Calgarians with disabilities, such as Darby Lee Young’s Level Playing Field, an accessibility consulting agency, or Sean Crump’s Included By Design, which helps clients see an ROI (Return On Inclusion) built on leading internationally legislated accessibility standards.

There are many other exciting local developments led by or serving people with disabilities. Vecova has embarked on an ambitious \$122 million capital campaign to develop its Centre for All Abilities.²⁴² Horizon Housing continued to expand its portfolio of affordable, accessible, supportive housing, also joining forces in a merger with Forward Housing.²⁴³ Calgary’s disability pride movement is only one of two such entities in Canada. Now widespread in the US, having started in 1990, the disability pride movement – there called AmeriPride – has a focus on “accepting and honoring each person’s uniqueness and seeing it as a natural and beautiful part of human diversity”.²⁴⁴ The Calgary founder of Disability Pride Alberta, Andrea van Vugt, is also the regional lead for the campaign to establish a Canadian disability benefit. Bill C-22, a proposed Act to introduce a Disability Benefit (a narrower form of universal basic income) is premised on recognition that disability support payments were barely enough to cover rent even when housing was affordable and accessible, leaving little for food, clothes, accessibility aids, transportation or any “non-essential” items such as recreational activities. The Benefit is expected to be in place by 2024.

It is worth noting that rapid advances in assistive devices are an important domain of research and development. Last year's scan included a section on gene editing and transhumanist technologies, both of which have some incredible current and potential applications, but are in other ways fraught, especially from the perspective of the disability community. Gene editing, if not guided by strong ethical frameworks and regulations, could develop to become a modern version of eugenics. These concerns notwithstanding, there are many promising potential advanced technological innovations that hold enormous potential; Far too many to recount in these pages. Last year's scan described brain-computer interface technologies (BCIs), essentially mind-machine melds, and we are now seeing applications being tested. For example, a device called Epoc-X, currently being tested in Toronto, converts brainwave intention patterns of those living with cerebral palsy (and potentially anyone with comparable verbal and physical communication barriers) into actionable commands that a computer can execute.²⁴⁵

Intersecting Health Care Issues

Worldwide, according to the World Health Organization, "persons with disabilities have twice the risk of developing conditions such as depression, asthma, diabetes, stroke, obesity or poor oral health."²⁴⁶ The World Health Assembly Resolution WHA74.8 calls on all countries "to ensure that persons with disabilities receive effective health services as part of universal health coverage; equal protection during emergencies; and equal access to cross-sectoral public health interventions."²⁴⁷ But while this might sound like a routinely attainable standard, people with disabilities may require specialized health care services, including physical therapy, rehabilitation, and counseling services. They may also require assistance with accessing and navigating the health care system, including help with finding a doctor and arranging transportation to appointments. There is also significant areas of overlap in the health systems that older Canadians interact with, and the systems relating to disability. For example, there are nearly 24,000 people with a disability living in long-term care in Canada who are not older adults.²⁴⁸

To the extent disability is a medical or health care issue, some broad health care trends are also important to keep in mind: Both medical and care professionals continue to experience high levels of stress, and are leaving these professions in numbers greater than we have previously seen. This mass exodus is putting additional pressure on health care and extended care systems, beyond the added pressures of COVID 19. Young people are attracted to health care professions in greater numbers, thanks to interest garnered during the pandemic, but little has been done to make this choice an affordable one.²⁴⁹ An aging population is putting additional pressures on certain regions, like the Maritimes and Vancouver Island. The current level of resources within health care may not only be sub-optimal, but increasingly are being seen as unsustainable, as health care eats up a greater and greater percentage of provincial and federal budgets.²⁵⁰ Despite this, we may also finally see the launch of a Canada Pharmacare Act by the end of 2023 to set up a system of universal drug coverage, something that has been part of the NDP platform for 30+ years.

We also have a bifurcated mental health class system in Canada. As an article in the Walrus asking the provocative question "Who gets to be mentally ill?" points out, "those who have the means to seek and pay for professional therapy, and those whose material conditions, economic circumstances and identities prevent them from being poster children for mental illness. If you are too mad, and especially black, Indigenous and unhoused, you can get roughed up and shot by police, [or] get your children taken away."²⁵¹ The article adds that mental health interventions risk making things worse (as with policing) or are in the private realm, covered by individuals or company health plans, but not by the system until things get so bad that hospitalization is necessary.

Scientific advances hold amazing promise for treatment, cures, and ultimately extending life expectancy, but the expense of new medications and procedures will be a barrier to universal adoption and coverage. And we will soon see the rise of med-tech converging with the internet of things; As Hyper Island's *Change of Tomorrow* report predicts: "We will all wear devices that capture detailed and personalized health data, measuring heart rate, blood glucose level, blood pressure, and more. Trusted doctors will have access to that data, giving them more information on which to make solid diagnoses, and we will understand the inner workings of our own bodies."²⁵²

Later in the spring, the Institute for Community Prosperity will be publishing a scan of accessibility issues, trends, system dynamics and innovations related to accessibility issues facing adults in Canada.

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“Social norms surrounding sexual orientation, gender, and relationships are rapidly evolving. Young people are having less sex than older generations. They also engage in more ethical non-monogamy. They stick less to “male” and “female” identities, and self-identify according to a much more diverse and fluid set of sexual orientations. The declining proportion of married couples over the last half century suggests that marriage may be increasingly irrelevant to younger generations. Marriage may fall out of favour altogether, but it may also evolve. Future changes could reflect the evolution of gender-fluid language, culture, and norms that challenge the dominance of opposite-sex marriage”²⁷⁰

Policy Horizons, Future Lives, 2022



QUEERING THE FUTURE: Embracing the Nonbinary, Many-Spirited Century



“You look at history paintings and they’ve been shown for hundreds of years. And they’ll be shown 150 years from now. The question for me is, what will they be shown with? This is part of our history. And it needs to endure.”²⁶⁸

Kent Monkman, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* (art exhibition, 2017)

In the Spotlight

Two major events in the 2022 - the FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the Iranian uprising - brought into sharp focus the divide in how gender norms are viewed in the “West” in contrast to the Persian Gulf region, and more broadly the Islamic-influenced world. The world’s revulsion at Qatar’s many steps to quash LGBTI²⁵³ activism or public expressions of any kind, along with FIFA’s complicity, have placed a spotlight on a growing global cleavage with respect to how humanity views gender identity, sexual identity, and gender expression. Indonesia, the world’s largest majority-Muslim nation, has just outlawed sex outside (heteronormative) marriage and cohabitation.²⁵⁴ In Iran, the beating death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, at the hands of Guidance Patrol officers, having been arrested for improperly wearing a hijab (in violation of the country’s mandatory hijab law), sparked a mass uprising. While the uprising might still turn into a revolution, the government’s response has been ferocious, with mass arrests, tortures and indiscriminate killings of activists and students.

A Long Road Back

While it is tempting to be self-satisfied about our supposed progressivism, the reality is that Canada remains on a long journey from where, mere decades ago, homosexuality was criminalized (officially until 1969, though police raids and civil rights abuses continued well into the early 21st century). Going back many centuries prior, the Abrahamic religious traditions all managed to freeze a binary world view in place, which was entrenched with the spread of Christianity and Islam, supercharged through colonization. In fact, the lion’s share of our colonial history was spent imposing binary gender and sexuality norms on societies that in many cases had far more fluid, humane, and evidence-informed approaches. Jesuit missionaries recorded how in Iroquois society, for example, cross-gender behavior was normalized²⁵⁵, and later anthropologists recorded examples of “two-spirit” gender and/or sexuality expression among a minimum of 130 North American Indigenous nations.²⁵⁶ Barely a century ago, gender-based civil and political rights were - to crudely compare - on par with where the modern Arabian peninsula and Persian Gulf states are now (women received the franchise in Alberta in 1916, though women in Quebec didn’t gain the franchise until the 1940s, with Indigenous women in 1960). Though interestingly, one futurist from a century ago predicted gender-bending aesthetic expressions to be the norm today.²⁵⁷

The apotheosis of heteronormativity in North America - along with, arguably, the apex of settler racism and indifference toward Indigenous peoples - was the 1950s. This same decade ironically saw the explosive release of the Kinsey Reports, which revealed that sexuality for many people - likely a very large portion of the population (based on a sample size of over 11,000 human research subjects) - is non-binary.²⁵⁸ Among the many findings of the Kinsey report, 46% of the male subjects had “reacted” sexually to persons of both sexes during their adult lives, and 37% had at least one homosexual experience.²⁵⁹ A previous section of this scan invokes the name of the brilliant Alan Turing, widely credited as the father of artificial intelligence. Turing was arrested for homosexuality and chemically castrated within the lifetime of many Boomers alive today (in 1952; he committed suicide 2 years later). Turing’s Law, which pardoned thousands of people who were convicted under past legislation that outlawed homosexual activity, was passed only a mere half decade ago. And while it is also tempting to view the west’s disgust with recent anti-LGBTI events as evidence of a more enlightened and humane ethos, we continue to see shocking events like the November attack on Club Q in Colorado Springs.

In some ways, one could say that Canada is returning to its pre-colonial non-binary roots. The Canadians who sacrificed much on this path, who took monumental steps of courage, and who educated the broader public while changing our cultural ethos from fear to tolerance (and ultimately to a widespread embrace of Pride as a defining feature of the public realm) are too numerous to mention. But a few highlights that sketch disparate parts of this journey warrant mention:

- In 1971, the year of the first gay liberation march on Parliament Hill, George Hislop founded the first gay and lesbian civil society organization – the Homophile Association of Toronto.²⁶⁰
- Vancouver celebrated the first Pride Week in Canada in 1973, and the first Pride parade in 1978, the same year that in Calgary the first national trans publication was produced by the Foundation for the Advancement of Canadian Transsexuals (FACT).²⁶¹
- 1984 saw the registration of Canada’s first charity – Pink Triangle Services – expressly devoted to the celebration of sexual and gender diversity. Douglas Stewart helped create Zami, Canada’s first Black queer group.
- At the Third Annual Inter-Tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference, held in Winnipeg in 1990, the term “two-spirit” (or *niizh manidoowag*) was gifted to our modern lexicon by Anishaabe Elder Myra Laramee.
- In 1996, Alberta Theatre Projects staged the Tony-award winning *Angels in America*, in the face of homophobic vitriol from political and community leaders at all levels, but smashing attendance records and immeasurably enriching civil discourse in Calgary.²⁶²
- A 1998 case appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada by Delwind Vriend against the Alberta government led to the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected human right in Canada.
- In 2015, Estefan Cortes-Vargas was elected as Alberta’s first out non-binary politician (MLA), four years before Alberta MP Blake Desjarlais would be elected as the first Two-Spirit MP.
- In 2017, the Canadian Human Rights Act was amended to include gender identity and gender expression as grounds protected from discrimination, and 2021, ‘conversion therapy’ was criminalized in Canada (a year after Calgary City Council enacted a by-law banning the practice).
- Last year, Cree painter Kent Monkman, known for his two-spirit alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, was featured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This past year’s winner of the Giller Prize, the top literary honour in Canada, is Calgary queer author Suzette Mayr for her novel *The Sleeping Car Porter*, the story of a closeted gay black rail porter set in 1929.
- Also this past year, the Federal Government announced Canada’s first 2SLGBTQIA+ *Action Plan* – “*Building our future, with pride*, a whole-of-government approach to achieve a future where everyone in Canada is truly free to be who they are and love who they love.”²⁶³

The Coming Decade

The challenge for the coming decades will include how we translate domestic values to global action, how we queer social innovation and futures thinking (as well as private sector norms), and how evolving terminology informs and is adopted into public discourse. Globally, the challenge will be for this still-new dimension of Brand Canada to constructively help shape international norms, well beyond the provisions included in Global Affairs Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy. We also may benefit from seeing the future collectively through a *queer lens*, which, according to futurist Niklas Larsen, may be crucial to social innovation and to thriving in the world to come.²⁶⁴ As Larsen notes, a queer lens helps us dig deeper into underlying assumptions and frameworks that keep dysfunctional or sub-optimal systems ‘stuck.’ A queer lens also rejects binary thinking, embracing ambiguity, paradoxes, and – most importantly – change. It also helps us integrate intersectionality and permits us to prioritize pleasure, joy, and celebrating humanity in its diverse forms in lieu of prioritizing accumulation or growth as ends. As the organization Queer the Future urges, it will be important to “tap into our resilience, our formally-grassroots communities of care, and the ‘queer imagination’ that is primed to spot abundance and potential within the worlds of each identity, or mask, we live in.”²⁶⁵ Canadian companies are also among the global leaders in adopting gender and LGBTQ2+ inclusion targets within broader ESG commitments.²⁶⁶

Also, with each new addition to the acronym, the latest iteration as at mid-2022 being 2SLGBTQIA+, look for the term “queer” – appropriated and repurposed from its original derogatory use – to increasingly be used as short-hand among those who identify outside heteronormative or cisgendered frameworks.²⁶⁷

“

“Reading is an act of civilization; it’s one of the greatest acts of civilization because it takes the free raw material of the mind and builds castles of possibilities.”²⁶⁹

Ben Okri, Nigerian poet



12

LITERACY

FROM STEAM TO STREAM:
Rediscovering Literacy in a
Post-Text World¹

“

“I got into trouble a while ago for saying that I thought the internet led to increased literacy - people scolded me about the shocking grammar to be found online - but I was talking about fundamentals: quite simply, you can't use the net unless you can read.”³⁰⁷

Margaret Atwood

Post-Industrial Learning

The great challenge for education in the 21st century is to transition away from an industrial model of learning - which is deeply entrenched in our mindsets, assumptions, public policy, and learning institutions. As Policy Horizons Canada's *Future Lives* exploration observes “formal education has historically taken place in institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities. Today, new kinds of educational providers are emerging at all stages of the life course. Preschools, for example, that optimize learning through neuro- and cognitive science. Meanwhile, bootcamps offer fast training for in-demand tech roles. And free online courses designed by large corporations offer preferred employment to graduates.”²⁷⁰

Related to this is the challenge of moving toward a recognition that - much like it takes a village to raise a child - it takes a city to develop a person with a full set of 21st century skills and competencies. The work of LearningCity YYC led by Dr. David Finch, involving many Calgary-based organizations working in collaboration, is a local evidence-informed initiative to move the city toward a learning ecosystem model.²⁷¹ In addition, online learning is making it possible to learn new skills more flexibly and cheaply. Online options include an informal marketplace of coaches, massive open online courses (MOOCs), bootcamps, corporate-designed education, and career accelerators.²⁷² Virtual reality (VR) has huge potential in learning as well. A 2020 report by PwC looking at soft skills efficacy found that students learn four times faster in a VR setting than using traditional classroom methods, and with greatly heightened emotional connection to the material.²⁷³

We have also likely reached peak-STEM in the education discourse, realizing that the number one skill employers are looking for is adaptability. The focus on science, technology, engineering, and math now more regularly includes an 'A' for arts, recognizing the need for creativity as a core 21st century skill. Some of the post-mortems on the January 6th insurrection, freedom convoy, and the new golden age of conspiracy movements have suggested that in focusing singularly on STEM, or now STEAM, we have neglected civics. Never before have we so desperately required a sophisticated range of civic and social tools and insights.

And yet, lost in all this is ironically the original form of intentional learning, or at least the original focus of formalized education - storytelling and reading. Also known as literacy. So, with an 'R' for reading, we can move now from STEAM to STREAM, or bringing in the social/civic, STREAMS. Or perhaps its time to jettison the acronyms and realize that disciplinary learning of any kind is partly why we find ourselves struggling to think systemically, to embrace complexity, and ultimately to develop skills necessary for change and adaptability (again, the number one skill employers are seeking).

¹ Much of this section is adapted from the forthcoming publication James Stauch and Cordelia Snowdon-Lawley. *The Dandelion Dispersal: A Case Study in Scaling Social Impact through Dissolution*. Institute for Community Prosperity and Calgary Reads (forthcoming, 2023).

Literacy – What we Know

For the purposes of this scan, we are going to zero-in on literacy, a subject not addressed in previous scans. The Institute for Community Prosperity is currently in the midst of chronicling a living case study of the much-beloved local early childhood literacy organization Calgary Reads, which is expected to fully cease its operations by early 2023 and voluntarily revoke its charitable status by summer 2023. The aim of this 'Dandelion Strategy' is to not just continue to disperse impact in the community beyond the life of Calgary Reads, but to scale that impact outward and upward; for each seed to grow into a fully fledged organism of its own; a radical way to ramp up impact through paradoxically winding an organization down.²⁷⁴ As part of establishing the context of the Dandelion Strategy, we have taken stock of the state of literacy, regionally and nationally. Portions of this 'weather report' on literacy are including following.

The practice (and ultimately mastery) of reading²⁷⁵ and writing is collectively referred to as 'literacy'. The International Literacy Association refers to literacy as "the ability to ... communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials".²⁷⁶ As such, it is a form of human-technology interface, which in turn implies that there are many sub-variants of literacy - data literacy, cartographic literacy, and so on. Even quantitative literacy - also called "numeracy" - is often referred to as fundamentally a form of literacy, as it meets the same general criterion of making meaning from symbols. Understandings of the function and importance of literacy have evolved over hundreds of years. For example, in an earlier epoch, literacy was viewed as binary (you either could read and write, or you could not - the measure typically not going far beyond the ability to spell your own name). Moreover, its development was seen as the more-or-less exclusive purview of the school system. Over the last few decades, this binary approach has withered, also as the social and cultural aspects of reading and writing have come to be understood as just as important as the technical (and more easily measurable) aspects. Literacy levels have been strongly correlated to levels of economic development, and literacy is universally viewed as a core 21st century skill.²⁷⁷

While the Gutenberg printing press began a centuries-long acceleration of literacy among the masses, in Canada it was not until the early 20th century that reading was actively promoted from a more child-centred perspective, i.e. for the pleasure of reading.²⁷⁸ Reading for pleasure has numerous cognitive benefits at all stages of the life cycle, though with pronounced effects early on, relating not just to expanded vocabulary and imaginative capacity, but also to ability to memorize, focus and comprehend mathematics, leading in turn to better overall academic achievement (and the economic and health benefits that flow from that).²⁷⁹ The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, notes that during the first three years of life, brains are forming more than a million new neural connections per second. Building brain architecture at this early stage - the maximum plasticity phase of brain development - provides a framework foundation for learning that in turn plays a critical role in shaping future health, and ultimately strong communities. Dr. Judy Cameron, a Council member of the Harvard-based National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, notes that there is a strong correlation with high socio-economic status and early childhood vocabulary (which, incidentally, is also a positive feedback loop - high status enables great resources, and a lot of individual attention devoted to early childhood development).²⁸⁰ Attentive adults who read, talk to, and engage a child in rich conversation greatly help develop the child's neural circuits for reading, visual symbolism, association, reasoning, and other connections essential to higher order cognition, reasoning, logic, and problem-solving.

As such, investments in early literacy, in particular reading for pleasure and one-to-one adult-child reading-based interaction, have an extraordinary social and economic return. James Heckman, who shared the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2000, argued forcefully for the strong Return-On-Investment (ROI) of early childhood investments on pure economic prosperity grounds. The Early Intervention Foundation, A UK-based "What Works Network" centre of evidence aggregation and dissemination, notes that, in addition to a nurturing home environment, the most critical early intervention tied to later success in life is a



“focus on parents talking with their children more, sharing books, and simply discussing day-to-day goings-on, even from a young age.”²⁸¹ Conversely, if students lack proficiency in reading by the end of grade three, it seems clear from the literature that they will encounter significant obstacles for the rest of their educational journey.²⁸² Alarming, many jurisdictions fail to test for early reading or literacy skills.²⁸³ Alberta now tests for early literacy, but does not make these test results public.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have raised collective awareness of the systemic inequities in reading comprehension, which amplifies over one’s lifetime. As a recent article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review pointed out, “children of color, from underserved communities, and those who face learning challenges, have always been subject to a persistent gap in reading outcomes relative to white and more affluent peers, a systemic failure...”²⁸⁴ Recognition of these inequities is not new, underscoring the many social and philanthropic innovations over the past half century to redress this. Notable highlights include Sesame Street, a program of the Children’s Television Workshop financed by the Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation, and Head Start, which came from US President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society initiative and integrates (though is not based on) an emphasis on early literacy.²⁸⁵ However, programs that are expressly designed for early childhood reading involving one-on-one interaction show very strong efficacy, such as Stepping Stones to Literacy, which, according to one meta-analysis, has an extraordinary 1:17 cost-benefit ratio.²⁸⁶

Literacy in Canada

While Canada makes some of the largest collective investments in education of any OECD country, according to the most recent Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), Canada placed 23rd globally in fourth grade reading achievement.²⁸⁷ But Canada’s public investment in early childhood literacy has not caught up to research or practice insights.²⁸⁸ The vast majority of the federal government’s focus and money over the past few years has been on building access and equity in child care. Governmental approaches to early childhood literacy suffer from jurisdictional and ministerial scope limitations. Provincial governments are constitutionally responsible for education, yet this tends to bifurcate into K-12 and advanced/post-secondary, with pre-Kindergarten learning usually falling to areas of government tasked with social services. So what should be universal often tends to focus only on the vulnerable or marginalized, and as such early literacy can easily be clinicized or niche-programmatized, and almost always under-resourced relative to resources for school-aged and post-secondary-aged learning.²⁸⁹ Municipal governments often help fill gaps through the public library system, public health clinics, and neighbourhood or recreation hubs, but there are real limits to municipalities’ ability to embrace learning and education within their mandates.

The brightest spot in early childhood literacy in Canada may be in the philanthropic space: A number of philanthropic entities in Canada - including the Palix, Chagnon, Muttart, Lawson, Lyle S. Hallman, and Margaret and Wallace McCain Foundations - have helped underwrite research, experimentation and the development of new and promising approaches to early childhood literacy. In fact, there is even an Early Childhood Affinity Group under the umbrella of Philanthropic Foundations Canada, operating as a peer-learning group of grantmakers and community investment professionals.²⁹⁰ United Ways, community foundations, and the corporate sector have all contributed substantially to this space as well.

Back in 2009, the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, which connects 165 researchers at 37 institutions, produced a National Strategy for Early Childhood Literacy. The report highlighted the significant losses to the Canadian economy from poor functional adult literacy (42% of Canadians), a problem which in turn is rooted in the early years.²⁹¹ The Strategy noted that the “language and literacy environment of the child’s home and early learning and child care (ELCC) settings are strong determinants of early language and literacy skills,” and that 1 in 4 children entering Kindergarten were significantly behind because of the inadequacy of such environments in the home. This number mirrors the US figure.²⁹²

The 2020 Fall Economic Statement announced the creation of a Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care “to build capacity within the government and engage stakeholders to provide child care policy analysis to support a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system.”²⁹³ The centrepiece of this, of course, is the universal subsidised daycare program, announced in 2021 with a \$30 billion commitment over five years, and a \$9.2 billion commitment annually thereafter. While this infrastructure almost certainly will help early childhood development broadly speaking, it is unclear how much emphasis will be placed on literacy within this context. The most recent National Progress Report on Early Learning and Child Care (2018 to 2019) barely mentioned literacy.²⁹⁴ Neither the 2017 Multilateral Early Learning and Childcare Framework²⁹⁵ nor the 2018 Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework²⁹⁶ mention literacy at all.

Early Literacy in Alberta

Provincially, support for early childhood literacy is tepid and somewhat opaque. Alberta is also the only province in Canada that no longer collects reading data for 5-year-olds. The Province does test later, but in many respects this is too late (to maximize the opportunity to intervene in this critical neurodevelopmental phase). Alberta conducts an annual digital Student Learning Assessment at the Grade 3 level that provides a beginning-of-the-year “check in”. This past year, due to concerns over pandemic-related learning deficits, Grade 2 literacy was assessed in September 2022, while assessments for Grade 1 students will start in January 2023. But while parents can access their child’s individual results, and while teachers and administrators can access their class or school results, respectively, the results of the Assessment are not made public.²⁹⁷

The importance of childhood literacy in Calgary was noted as early as 1912-1913, when the early social innovator Alexander Calhoun, through the Calgary Public Library board, sought the appointment of a librarian to visit schools to distribute books and lead a “story-telling” hour in hopes that it would contribute to good reading habits.²⁹⁸ A century later, following the Children First Act in May of 2013, and pursuant to the Province’s Social Policy Framework, a public consultation resulted in the summary document *Together We Raise Tomorrow: An Alberta Approach to Early Childhood Development*, which unfortunately only mentioned literacy twice - a classic example of how literacy can be buried as a priority under pressing socio-economic needs like poverty, nutrition, and abuse prevention.²⁹⁹

A 2014 study of 87,000 kindergarten-aged kids revealed that Alberta children were below the Canadian norm for early childhood development.³⁰⁰ The report disclosed that fewer than half of all children had achieved the appropriate milestones in five areas of development measured, suggesting that pre-Kindergarten supports in the province are inadequate. Indeed, the United Way of Calgary and Area notes that less than 50% of kids are developmentally ready for kindergarten.³⁰¹

The Provincial Government promotes literacy almost exclusively for school-aged children only, through Alberta Education funding and support of Language Arts curriculum, as well as evaluating multiple literacies through a range of subjects. Provincially funded local Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) also allocate dollars to a range of early childhood initiatives, including improving parenting skills and reinforcing positive child and youth development. But they do not typically fund early literacy development.

Community, corporate, and private philanthropy and sponsorship contributes, by far, the most to early childhood literacy investment in Calgary. Local post-secondary institutions - in particular the University of Calgary and Mount Royal University - have been engaged in early literacy research, in part due to the support of the Calgary-based Palix Foundation (formerly Norlien Foundation), which supports the production and dissemination of neuroscience-informed research on childhood development. Palix Foundation, in turn, has worked with the FrameWork Foundation to translate scholarly research into actionable insights for practitioners in many fields, including early literacy work.³⁰² Numerous interviewees mentioned the unique niche filled by the Palix Foundation. Another important player in Calgary’s early childhood literacy research space is Owerko, a University of Calgary-affiliated centre studying child neurodevelopment and mental health, based out of the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute (ACHRI). Owerko is one of the legacy partners for the Dandelion Strategy, and is described in more detail later in this report.

Of fourteen charitable organizations dedicated primarily to promoting literacy in Alberta, the majority appear to focus on either literacy in the global south or enhancing literacy in rural communities).³⁰³ Civil society support for literacy development across Alberta was formerly supported at the provincial level through Literacy Alberta Society and before that also through the Alberta Literacy Foundation. Neither organization exists today, nor does the Alberta Reads Network, an initiative started by Calgary Reads. In addition to public, Catholic, charter and private school kindergarten programs, the Calgary Public Library, child care facilities, and certain community or social service agencies also support literacy in the early years.

Early Literacy in Calgary

There have been a number of city-wide collective impact initiatives looking at early childhood development holistically and systemically, including early literacy among other priorities. The Calgary and Area Early Childhood Development coalition, also known as The First 2000 Days Network was a collaborative effort of community members, organizations, and professionals working toward stronger relationships, behaviour change and collective action at all levels within the early childhood development (ECD) system. The Network advocated for the adoption of a city-wide strategy, inspired by system-wide collective efforts in Colorado, Detroit, and Winnipeg.³⁰⁴ Calgary Reads served as the incubator and fiscal agent/host for the First 2000 Days Network, which lasted from 2013 to 2020. The United Way of Calgary and Area and the Province of Alberta (Ministry of Human Services), enlisting the help of the global firm REOS, convened the Thrive by 5 Early Learning Innovation Lab between 2014 and 2017. The Thrive by 5 Lab was premised on imagining Calgary as the “best place in the world for a child to grow up”, which would require transforming the early childhood development (ECD) system.³⁰⁵ It is unclear what legacy resulted from the Thrive by 5 process.

For 22 years, Calgary Reads designed and delivered an innovative array of evidence-based early literacy resources, which are among the most unique in Canada.³⁰⁶ Its work was guided by a Manifesto that positions childhood reading as rights-based, emphasizes early (pre-school) literacy based on neuro-scientific insights, promotes child ownership of books, fosters reading as a pleasurable and joyous activity, and in spaces that are fun and imaginative. Perhaps most importantly, Calgary Reads emphasized that early reading is a community responsibility (not just a parental one). The Dandelion partners include two local nonprofit organizations (Big Sisters and Big Brothers Calgary and YW Calgary), two national organizations (United for Literacy and the Canadian Children’s Literacy Foundation), a service club (Rotary), and two universities (University of Calgary and Mount Royal University). As such, the Dandelion Strategy is one of the best examples we have of moving toward a Learning City.

“

“It’s like they realize that after they fed the beast, then the beast ate their face off... ‘Oh, maybe it was a bad thing that we did that.’ By feeding and fomenting that anger, it has very negative consequences.”³⁰⁸

Althia Raj, CBC At Issue



13

INFODEMIC

THE RAGE FARMERS: Feeding the Beast that Bites



“These [F*ck Trudeau] flags and the hyper-aggressive rhetoric that often accompanies them are slowly normalizing rage and damaging our democracy.”³³⁹

Erin O’Toole, MP and former Leader, Conservative Party of Canada

The Real Polarity

While many are rightly concerned about growing polarization, it is much too simplistic to say that it is a divide between right and left. In so many respects, the terms ‘right’ and ‘left’ don’t really hold much meaning anymore. As Erin O’Toole laments, for example, “these [F*ck Trudeau] flags are the very antithesis of what it means to be a conservative.” Digging into people’s real motivations and preferences, a much more heterodox reality emerges that seems to contradict this idea of growing ideological polarization. Is it conservative to want to preserve health care? Is it socialism to support the bodily autonomy of women?

There is, however, a much more insidious polarity at play – the battle between those who cultivate reason and those who farm rage. Another way to view this is the battle between information- and discourse-rich democracy and populism (or faux democracy). “Rage farming”, also called “rage baiting”, refers to a manipulative tactic – typically online – to elicit outrage with the goal of increasing engagement, revenue and support.³⁰⁹ Examples close to home include feeding the narrative that assault rifle legislation or carbon-curb-ing fertilizer regulations are deliberate attacks on farmers (or the latter even an attempt to starve the population), or that environmental protection legislation is an attack on hard-working Albertans, or indeed the very idea of what it means to be an Albertan. The consequences of rage farming can veer into not just civilly corrosive territory, as with the Freedom Convoy, but also dangerous territory, as with physically and sexually violent threats to (typically) female politicians. Some commentators directly linked rage farming to the threats to Deputy Minister Chrystia Freeland, which ironically were about the native Albertan not being welcome in Alberta.³¹⁰ Unfortunately, one particularly grave consequence of rage farming is that we can expect to see more violence directed at cabinet ministers, MPs, and members of the media, particularly women. It appears to be a major contributing factor into the early resignation of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, one of the most respected global leaders in the new millennium so far.³¹¹

Anti-Pluralism

As political scientist Jared Westley observes, “this time around, it’s not just anti-elitism, it’s what we call anti-pluralism”³¹², the socially-constructed – and deeply repugnant – idea that there are some people who are true and pure Albertans (much like the racist concept of the *pure laine* Quebecois or Old Stock Canadian). This “us” as the true people vs. “them” as the evil elites framing comes right out of the playbook of new wave autocrats, such as Victor Orban, who most recently has been denouncing “race mixing” in Hungary.³¹³ Prominent Canadian Conservative party members – including former Prime Minister Harper – have done little to distance themselves from their close ties to Mr. Orban.³¹⁴



Rage farming also exploits the algorithmic bias built into most social media platforms, which steers users toward emotionally-charged political rhetoric.³¹⁵ Writer and podcaster Molly Jong-Fast notes, “[r]age farming is... an unholy mélange of algorithms and anxiety”. For example, a young person searching Youtube for mental health supports will very quickly encounter Jordan Peterson, which in turn will expose them to other streams related to anything from anti-vaxx and flat earth conspiracy theories to streams teeming with toxic masculinity and incel angst.³¹⁶ Algorithmic engagement patterns over time also result in “filter bubbles”³¹⁷, an information world circumscribed by your own engagement, and therefore ultimately self-referential. By inference, access to unbiased or independently verified information is more frequently beyond our reach. One of the most well-publicized accounts of unchecked rage farming is Facebook’s unwillingness to police rage-inducing hate speech posts targeting the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar. To say that Facebook is in some measure complicit in the Rohingya genocide is not a stretch.³¹⁸

How Fury and Falsity Spread

In a 2020 book entitled *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* authors Cailin O’Connor and James Weatherall employed a variety of mathematical models to show how true and false information spreads. The modelling that permitted people to be influenced by their peers and social networks sometimes resulted in whole communities adopting false beliefs, even when accurate information was consistently presented to them.³¹⁹ Their findings reveal that “individually rational agents can form groups that are not rational at all.” Put another way, social bonding is a much more powerful determinant of community-wide adoption or rejection of information than the provision of fact-based news. O’Connor and Weatherall question an assumption that is almost sacrosanct in Western culture, from economics to our systems of democratic governance; That “humans are essentially rational, deftly sorting fact from fiction, and, ultimately, arriving at timeless truths about the world.”³²⁰ It is generally not the case that news consumers can be subtly steered toward more accurate beliefs when simply presented with reliable information. Encouragingly, fact checking outlets have not only increased in number, but also in accessibility to average citizens. According to Duke University’s Reporter’s Lab, in 2014 sixty initiatives focused exclusively on verifying media claims. Today, there are more than 400 such initiatives worldwide. However, there is little evidence this has made a positive dent in how we collectively consume news.³²¹ Trust, it appears, almost always trumps accuracy.

In a recent *Walrus* essay entitled “How Do We Exit the Post-Truth Era?”, Vivienne Fairbank similarly observes that fact-checking won’t solve the misinformation problem: “Polarization between groups with different beliefs is therefore easy to incite, and once this polarization is established, no amount of fact-checking from outside a particular community will convince the people within it to change their minds.”³²² According to a Danish study on media literacy cited in this same article: “...people don’t share fake news because they actually believe in the content’s accuracy. Rather, they believe in its value.”³²³

This unnerving sociological terrain is the soil in which either nourishing crops or noxious weeds can be grown. Community and political leaders who value high quality information – whether in the form of news, scholarship, or discourse – while making efforts to furnish “bridging” social capital – understandings between diverse peoples and communities, end up nurturing civil society and the public realm. But those who exploit the comfort of “bonding” social capital among a particular in-group, while stoking fear and paranoia beyond this zone of comfort and familiarity, instead erode civil society and the public realm. Westley explains the appeal of the latter approach: “What these narratives do for conspiracy theorists, is that it helps them make sense of, first of all, complex things that don’t otherwise make sense; it’s boiled down into something really simple. And secondly, it gives [conspiracy theorists] an out of sorts, where it allows them to see other people as being either the source of their problems or as being less moral or less worthy.”³²⁴

Machiavellian politicians have long understood this dynamic – that it is far more powerful to play to people’s fears than it is to reveal doubt, appeal to evidence, or acknowledge nuance. At the Nuremberg Trials in 1946, Hermann Goering dryly noted how easy it was to exploit fear: “Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked.”³²⁵ US Vice President Kamala Harris observed, reflecting on 2022, that “...we are once again forced to defend fundamental principles that we hoped were long settled – principles like the freedom to vote, the rights of women to make decisions about their own body, even what constitutes the truth.”³²⁶

The Poisonous Patois of Populist Politicians

But while this dynamic is as old as politics itself, it has been elevated to new heights (or taken to new lows) internationally by the likes of Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, and Donald Trump (as well as his legions of acolytes, still a powerful voting block in the US Congress). Closer to home, Pierre Poilievre – who O’Toole is obliquely aiming his lament toward – is more the heir apparent in this respect not to previous Conservative leaders, but rather to the People’s Party’s Maxime Bernier. As one commenter noted, Poilievre “unapologetically shook hands with a leader of a known extremist hate group without excuse or explanation, winked at conspiracy theories for political gain, made dubious claims about how cryptocurrencies are a way to ‘opt out’ of inflation, and has stoked anger toward life-saving vaccine mandates and public health measures.”³²⁷ Poilievre’s dog whistles are sometimes subtle, as with the repeated use of the #MGTOW hashtag in his campaign videos, which stands for “Men Going Their Own Way”, a recognized wink to the anti-feminist movement. Other times, it is overt, for example when he literally shouted through a bullhorn “Freedom, not fear. Truckers, not Trudeau.”³²⁸ One commentator noted that Poilievre “marched and posed with ‘militant accelerationists’ from the Diagonol movement [and US shock radio host] Alex Jones recently gushed over Poilievre’s leadership victory, listing him – along with Brazil’s Bolsonaro and Italy’s Giorgia Meloni as proof ‘we are rising’.”³²⁹ He is also very skilled at amplifying the aggrieved, and openly styles himself a defender of the working class: “I think we have to ask ourselves: why are people so angry?... And the answer is that they’re hurting”, he said in response to O’Toole’s admonishment.³³⁰ Channelling his inner Marxist – *from each according to his ability to each according to his needs* – among the many freedoms Poilievre insists he’ll fight for, is the “freedom to keep the fruits of your labour and share them with loved ones and neighbours.”³³¹

Poilievre and his provincial ideological soulmate, Danielle Smith, both traffic in the narrative of a nefarious ‘global elite’ – in particular the World Economic Forum – pulling the puppet strings of deluded sheep the world over (interesting to think that a mere two decades ago, this was the tack used by the far left to protest the World Trade Organization). Smith’s rage at Ottawa is more ham-fisted – striking many as amorphous, ill-informed, and ill-conceived – but to the already-enraged, it has the clarity of a finely polished bell. Along uncannily similar lines, the Russian-led troll campaign, as the New Knowledge Foundation points out, works to undermine “citizens’ trust in government, exploit societal fractures, create distrust in the information environment, blur the lines between reality and fiction, undermine trust among communities, and erode confidence in the democratic process.” Ideological predecessors Jason Kenney, Andrew Scheer and even Stephen Harper were frequent rage farmers themselves, but not consistently so. They were much more likely to tack to the political centre when the rage felt like it was growing beyond their control. Indeed, it was reactionary rage – not progressive forces – that finished Kenney’s political career.

Shortly after the end of the second world war, struck by the ease with which working class people fell in thrall to rage-fueled movements (even within the Allied countries), the social philosopher Eric Hoffer penned his book *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*.³³² In it, Hoffer observed that the most dangerous dynamic within a society is “the new poor” – those who tasted prosperity, then fell upon hard times. All the worse if the newly poor are young, single, poorly educated males, as you would find by the tens of thousands in Alberta, as lower-skilled (but well remunerated) oil and gas field jobs became scarcer due to falling global prices and automation.³³³ Hoffer even mused that some of these rage-fueled movements may actually manifest as the birth of new religions. QAnon is an obvious example in our current context, but more powerful and internally coherent *ethea* are bound to follow. Another key to the growth of such movements is how welcoming and nurturing they are. To anyone who observed the Ottawa convoy encampments, this was obvious. As Anand Ghiridaridas points out, “one of the ironies of our time is that some of the most dangerous and antidemocratic movements have managed to make their causes appear welcoming and make newcomers feel at home, whereas some of the most righteous, inclusive, and just movements give off a feeling of being inaccessible and standoffish.”³³⁴

Despite O’Toole’s belated disavowal, much like Jason Kenney’s in Alberta³³⁵, the two leaders helped plant the early seedlings of these ill weeds. Upon Kenney’s resignation from politics, he Tweeted the following: “From the far left we see efforts to cancel our history, delegitimize our historically grounded institutions and customs and divide society dangerously along identity lines. And from the far right we see a vengeful anger and toxic cynicism which often seeks to tear things down, rather than build up and improve our imperfect institutions.” Blythe to his own role in fomenting rage, Kenney has lamented the “kooks” and “lunatics” that have been drawn to the conservative movement: “Preston Manning used to say that a bright light attracts a few bugs, well, there’s more than a few bugs attracted to us, this party, right now.”³³⁶ From the benign days of a few bugs, we are now contending with plagues of locusts, or as Renée DiResta describes it “in an evolving, ongoing conflict: an Information World War in which state actors, terrorists, and ideological extremists leverage the social infrastructure underpinning everyday life to sow discord and erode shared reality.”³³⁷ As DiResta further warns, with AI-scripted news and the onset of GPT-4, “the supply of disinformation will soon be infinite.”³³⁸

“

“If the government wants to do something to help solve the housing crisis, they need to address the financialization of housing.”³⁴⁰

Bader Abu-Zahra, ACORN



WHEN A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME:

The Financialization of Housing

“The way to become rich is to put all your eggs in one basket and then watch that basket.”

Andrew Carnegie

Since last year’s scan, which contained a detailed section outlining the dimensions and apparent drivers of the affordable housing crisis, we have seen the issue of housing affordability become ever more severe. Among the many dire findings in a recent Scotiabank report on housing affordability, “[o]ver 10% of Canadian households (or 1.5 mn) were in ‘core housing need’ according to the 2021 census. By definition, they have nowhere else to go in the marketplace. Another near-quarter of a million Canadians are homeless.”³⁴¹ With this crisis, we have seen a steady rise in shelter use and unstructured encampments, as well as encampments emerging in medium and smaller cities (e.g., Halifax, Kitchener-Waterloo, Kelowna, Red Deer, etc.), something we once would have only seen south of the border. There is also a push for formalization of many of the more established encampments.³⁴² Shelters, in contrast to encampments, are neither intended to be, nor are ever embraced, as a ‘home,’ whereas encampments – rudimentary and unsafe though they can be, have some semblance of ‘home.’³⁴³

One of the contributing factors to this growing stain on the social fabric of Canada is financialization. Financialization³⁴⁴ is the trend by which a greater portion of national incomes and economies – including Canada’s – are in financial services (banking, insurance, financial trading, and so on). Easy credit and a tolerance for high levels of debt (vis-à-vis equity) has permitted households to be dangerously overleveraged, while their financial assets (ballooning mortgages in particular) are exchanged via increasingly exotic financial instruments in the money markets. Asset managers take big risks with other people’s money, mortgage lenders understate the risk of loans, and banks overextend themselves on the (probably correct) assumption that they are too big to fail. Economists refer to these collective set of behaviours as “moral hazards,” but social critics have also pointed out that this behaviour is consistent with “socializing risk” while “privatizing” profit. Financialization in the housing context is “a term used to describe how housing is treated as a commodity – a vehicle for wealth and investment – rather than a human right and a social good for people and communities.” Financialization has been identified as a major barrier to affordability by Canada’s first federal housing advocate, Marie-Josée Houle.³⁴⁵

Simultaneously, this has also been a factor in the profound drop in trust of financial institutions. The irony is that the risks taken with people’s money, as David LePage points out in his book *Marketplace Revolution*, aren’t mirrored in our everyday experience of seeking grassroots investment at the local level, which means the same risk tolerance is not extended to small businesses, never mind cooperatives, nonprofit housing providers, or other community-based groups.³⁴⁶ As LePage notes, there remains “an urgent need to transform our existing system of finance and investment to become purposefully inclusive, innovative and catalytic, actively advancing economic, social, and environmental change by being more flexible, patient and risk-tolerant.”³⁴⁷

But financialization isn’t just damaging communities; it also carries market peril. Over 55 per cent of Canadian household net worth is in residential real estate, compared with 30 per cent in the U.S. now and 39 per cent at the 2006-07 peak of the pre-financial crisis bubble.³⁴⁸ Canadians collectively now carry more than \$2.7 trillion in household debt. Put another way, financial institutions own \$2.7 million in resident liabilities (i.e., credit). As reported in last year’s scan, the federal government has pledged more than \$70 billion toward a national housing strategy over 10 years. However, Canada’s housing advocate says there is little evidence the strategy is making any impact.³⁴⁹ Homelessness has reached crisis levels, shelter lists are maxed, waiting lists for the severely limited stock of non-market housing are astronomical, and tent cities are springing up not just in the metropolises but in medium and smaller-sized cities all over Canada. As Houle points out, this crisis has its root in policy-driven, systemic failures. The Auditor General has noted, for example, that homeless-fighting strategies and broader affordable housing aims are not integrated, and are located within two completely different federal ministries.³⁵⁰ The current federal target to build 160,000 new affordable homes total is nowhere near what is needed, especially factoring in Canada’s annual immigration target of 500,000 per annum.



Financialization is diminishing the affordable housing stock, at a time when public policy aims to increase affordable supply. Upwards of 70 per cent of Canada's purpose-built rental housing is now controlled by Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), property-owning investment vehicles which are designed to maximize profit for shareholders.³⁵¹ The largest 17 financial firms now control 344,000 suites, or 20 percent, of the country's purpose-built rental housing. REITs have been purchasing rental buildings, upgrading them and raising rents, ultimately forcing low-income tenants out of their homes. This trend has been supercharged during the pandemic, as real estate was perceived as a safe haven for investment.³⁵² One-third of all seniors' housing in Canada has been financialized, along with 20-30 percent of purpose-built rental buildings.³⁵³ Financialization affects both affordability and security of tenure, and – coupled with the primary health care crisis – is ultimately a factor in driving up demand for (often prematurely placed) long-term care, leading in turn to higher mortality for those who are housing insecure.³⁵⁴ Financialization also helps explain why, in a city like Calgary, we have much more housing and greater building density in the inner cities than in past decades, and yet fewer people (although part of this is because of smaller families and larger living footprints).

Since 1972, the federal government has permitted capital gains on home ownership to serve explicitly as a tax shelter.³⁵⁵ This means those in hot markets with sufficient capital to get into the housing market and build equity are at a significant tax advantage. As the organization Generation Squeeze points out, those who were able to enter the housing market prior to this loophole, have experienced a nearly three-fold inflation-adjusted increase in housing value, and far higher in consistently hot markets like BC and Southern Ontario.³⁵⁶ A retired homeowner in Vancouver with the same fixed income as a retired homeowner in Fredericton will pay roughly the same in taxes, but the Vancouverite will enjoy much higher de facto income, the home equity portion of which is largely sheltered from taxation. It may come as a surprise to the latter (earning \$22,000 a year) to learn that the majority of Canadians would perceive them as either very or moderately “wealthy.”³⁵⁷ In this light, expect pressure to build to tax windfall gains, perhaps in the form of property surcharges or capital gains on houses ‘flipped’ within a certain time period, not just to cool the housing market and help subsidize non-market housing construction, but ultimately to quell class-based resentment and potential social disorder.

As last year's scan highlighted³⁵⁸, with much fanfare the federal government put in rules delimiting foreign ownership, but while these measures have had some positive impact, they are likely insufficient. Moreover, the government did so without reference to domestic financialization. Even the Calgary market is now heavily impacted by domestic speculative purchasing, as anywhere between 50% and 70% of October condo sales in Calgary were to purchasers – large and small – based in Ontario.³⁵⁹ As evictions are the natural corollary of financialization, we can expect increased demands locally for rent control, something that was once unthinkable in Alberta.

Last year's scan also pointed out the growing chasm between the house rich and the house poor in Canada, intensified through the intergenerational transfer of wealth.³⁶⁰ This could deepen the divide between social classes: Millennial issues writer Kiara Barrow notes that “On the one hand, there are people who must work to live. On the other, there are those who can live off capital assets such as property and stocks. People who do not inherit assets may find them increasingly hard to accumulate. This could lead to more social discord and counter-cultural practices.”³⁶¹



“

“Participation in the collective life of the polis both restrains the extraordinary individual and enlarges the ordinary individual, allowing him to participate in the extraordinary. An individual can achieve participatory excellence via the accomplishments of the polis and need not always be caught up in the agnostic struggle to outdo his peers.”³⁶²

Dr. Gabor Maté,
trauma specialist

15

POLIS

REFUGES OF REASON: The Virtual Rebirth of the City-State

“This city is what
it is because
our citizens are
what they are.”

Plato

The End of Nations?

One of the key worldwide trends identified by Hyper Island, a global consulting firm that creates learning experiences to help organizations shape the future, in their *Changes of Tomorrow* future trends report, is entitled *Globalized culture: The end of nations*: “In this globalized future, information circulates freely, hierarchies emerge and dissipate, and new and innovative subcultures flourish and wither at the whim of fashion. Perhaps the idea of nation-states will gradually erode as the differences between cultures and countries become less relevant than the similarities.”³⁶³ Indeed, citizens have less and less faith in the state to achieve solutions to complex problems, and are increasingly exploring more decentralized, communitarian, mutual aid-driven solutions. Others, on the contrary, maintain that we are at the beginning of a period of de-globalization, much like circa 1914, when nationalism surged, bookended by the two world wars.³⁶⁴ But even if de-globalization is happening, it is not a foregone conclusion that the refuge people are seeking is at the nation-state or country-wide level.

Previous scans have touched on the growing urban-rural divide in Canada, arguably more profound than any other regional division, whether east-west, north-south, or even Francosphere-Anglosphere. There are stark demographic and ideological differences between urban and rural areas, in most areas of the country, and rates of enrollment in post-secondary education are dramatically different. Conventional wisdom would therefore dictate that priority for public policy, and indeed philanthropy, should be to try and lessen this divide. And it is true that urbanites too often do not understand rural realities (case in point, the sometimes-tone-deaf

blanket long gun restrictions). Conversely though, rural Canadians can caricature urban places as Sodom and Gomorrah, even as cities have lower crime rates per capita, less family breakdown, and longer life expectancies.³⁶⁵ Farmers feed cities, the billboards say, but cities provide farmers their market and livelihood. But what if, instead of trying to ‘fix’ the urban-rural divide, in the spirit of the plural and multi-nation nature of our post-post-modern society, 21st century Canadian cities were recognized as distinct societies?

From Triumph to Survival

The ancient Romans made a distinction between “civitas,” the equivalent of a free city-state, and “municipium,” a non-sovereign city. Today’s Canadian cities much more closely resemble the latter, as municipalities are – in effect – vassals of the provinces. Cities have no constitutional recognition, and could – in theory (and occasionally in practice) – be dissolved, have their councils replaced, or their decisions overturned by provincial fiat. Yet, cities are the most important locus of large-scale democratic engagement, providing the most visible and essential services (on a day-to-day living scale), and most frequently and directly touch peoples’ lives.

But COVID-19 exposed a crisis of growing inequality within Canadian cities. As a recent Canadian Urban Institute forum highlighted, Canadian cities are under tremendous economic and financial pressure as people vacate downtowns in favour of telecommuting.³⁶⁶ It is clear that commute culture will never return to its pre-pandemic levels, anywhere. As Harvard urban economist Ed Glaeser puts it, “we’ve gone from “triumph of the cities” to “survival of the cities”.³⁶⁷ The solutions are not obvious. Suggestions include scaling up business improvement district models, incentivizing the conversion of office buildings (as Calgary is doing) which converts monocultural ‘business districts’ to more vibrant mixed use, and expanding the fiscal powers of local government.

Urban Citizenship

Considering this, there is added pressure for governance models to change, to allow for greater participation and an expanded role of marginalized communities in decision-making processes. The emerging field of *collective intelligence* is showing how large-scale participation has the power to augment democracy.³⁶⁸ Cities are also the most likely place where young people express their hopes, desires, and angst. Some cities have lowered the municipal voting age so that working-age teenagers can participate, partially motivated by the same adage that fueled the American Revolution – “no taxation without representation.” City halls are typically where demonstrations like *Fridays for Future*, the Greta Thunberg-inspired youth movement for climate action, choose to gather. In China, cities are the locus of the ‘lying flat’ movement, where youth are ‘opting out’ of the system.

Prior to the Roman era, the explosion of Greek thinking and innovation in fields as diverse as philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy took place in the context of free city states like Athens, Thebes and Sparta. The term for these city states (in particular, the central part of the city) is *polis*, which is the etymological root of *metropolis*, *politics*, and *policy*. As such, it is a richer concept than just a municipality. The polis is really a unity of place and participation; Locality and dialogue; City and democratic state.

University of Toronto law and political science professor Ran Hirschl, in an essay entitled “Cities vs States: Should Urban Citizenship be Emancipated from Nationality?” Notes that “innovative thinking about urbanisation and cities is prevalent throughout the human sciences; Henri Lefebvre’s *Le droit à la ville*, Saskia Sassen’s work on global cities, Paul Krugman’s theorisation of megacities as economies of scale, Richard Florida’s ideas about cities as magnets for the creative classes, and Benjamin Barber’s *If Mayors Ruled the World* are a few examples. This rich intellectual attention, by contrast, does not extend into the world of constitutional law. Here, the city remains a non-entity and a non-subject.”³⁶⁹ In Canada, only a handful of people have advocated for provincial status for Canada’s largest city, but that handful includes the venerable Jane Jacobs³⁷⁰, at least two former Mayors and, more recently, former Toronto chief planner Jennifer Keesmat. Both Calgary and Edmonton’s respective populations are larger than any of the Atlantic provinces’ combined populations, and either are about the same size as the province of Manitoba.

While it may be audacious (and completely unrealistic) to suggest that cities should have provincial standing, never mind the double-fantasy of amending the Constitution for any purpose, there is nonetheless an emerging identity to cities that is vastly distinct from the Canadian fabric as a whole. And their fiscal powers, as former Winnipeg Mayor Glen Murray pointed out, are incredibly limited, as compared with the ambit of their responsibilities.

But there are other more realistic and contemporary proposals to make cities democratic, accountable, and inclusive. Recognizing that the vast majority of new immigrants settle in cities, municipalities are challenged to incorporate social equity and explicit race-based lenses into their decision-making, reimagining governance practices to be far more heterodox and inclusive. As Brittany Andrew-Amofah, Alexandra Flynn, and Patricia Wood argue in a recent paper for the Institute on Municipal Finance at the Munk School of Global Affairs, Canadian cities must “strengthen offices focused on equity and Indigenous Affairs, fundamentally reform public engagement, and make neighbourhood governance structures more robust, accountable, and inclusive. To do so will require greater engagement with equity-deserving communities and community bodies, modifications to existing governance structures, and legislative changes.”³⁷¹

Cities are also as tied to global networks of commercial, familial, social, and cultural activity as they are to their proximate rural regions, and their politics tend to be distinctly less reactionary to change and more likely to embrace diversity, experimentation, and new ideas. This is an oversimplification, as many rural places and smaller centers out-innovate the largest cities, and many smaller places put big cities’ supposed ‘tolerance’ to shame, but there is nonetheless an overall pattern. As well, as last year’s scan noted, on most social issues, from medically assisted dying to foreign trade, Calgarian’s views are indistinguishable from demographically similar cities outside of Calgary.³⁷² That is to say, we are broadly progressive urban Canadians.

Reshaping the Polis and Agora

Three of the urban spaces that most closely represent the idea of the polis, perhaps also blended with the *agora*, the marketplace-meets-public-gathering-space, are public universities, city centres, and mainstreets. But across Canada, all three are in decline as vibrant spaces. As the Canadian Urban Institute in its *Bring Back Mainstreet* campaign notes “Canada’s main streets are iconic symbols of urban life and belonging – where we go to shop and do business, eat, play and participate in civic life.”³⁷³ A post-pandemic Toronto study showed that businesses that replaced patios made 49 times more money than the parking revenue formerly in the same spot.³⁷⁴ And the pandemic led to more large group gatherings in parks and public spaces (e.g. kids birthday parties), resulting in pressure to expand park frequency and availability, range of permissible park uses, and ultimately a changed public feeling about the role of public spaces. The new University District in northwest Calgary, built on university endowment lands, is another welcome shift akin to the *agora*. There is also a lot of discussion – and interest among politicians across the spectrum – in attracting post-secondary institutions downtown. While this idea has substantial merit, there are few if any real incentives: Post-secondary space is arguably underutilized on existing campuses, so there is no strong endogenous driver to expand. As well, the logistics of student commuting make transferring between campuses impractical, even more so for MRU, which lacks LRT access.

All downtowns in all Canadian urban centres have seen rising vacancy rates since the pandemic revealed that most white-collar jobs can be done remotely. Calgary’s shedding of office jobs in the oil and gas sector had put the city in an early lead with respect to vacancy rates, when over a third of available downtown space was vacant by mid-2022. While that number has since dropped to under 30%, it remains the highest in the country. But Vancouver’s office vacancy rate has tripled since before the pandemic, Montreal’s has doubled, and other cities are not far behind.³⁷⁵ As Raymond Wong of commercial real estate firm Altus Group observes “I think the days of coming in, sitting at your desk and [working] nine to five are over.”³⁷⁶

To the extent downtown office culture has a future, it will be tied to lifestyle attractors and amenities, from onsite daycare facilities, gyms, showers, to bike storage/cleaning/maintenance facilities to co-working and semi-public flex spaces. MobSquad Café on the 21st floor of Calgary's Edison Building is an example of a creative re-use of downtown vertical office space. It is intentionally designed to foster "collisions," which is tech-speak for welcoming curious creatives to come work, network, and interact. The Café has even become popular among students as a study space, a remarkable feat for a downtown that otherwise has a reputation for being youth-unfriendly. Aspen Properties, which owns the Edison, also developed the Ampersand, featuring indoor food trucks and a main-floor semi-public dialogue and auditorium space.³⁷⁷

Retrofitting Class B and C office space into residential, including but not limited to affordable housing (as we have seen Homespace take a leadership role in, for example), is an essential part of the puzzle of revitalizing downtowns. The next frontier will be repurposing vacant surface-level parking lots (including using municipal fiscal measures as both carrots and sticks for landowners). Calgary has the additional challenge – much more difficult and expensive to change – of a dull grid of one-way, extra-wide downtown streets (most built to the specs of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue). The only interesting streets, where traffic is forced to slow down, meander and share the road with pedestrians, are one or two-block stretches in Eau Claire and the East Village. Incentives to build and extend patios, bicycle lanes, and other street-level amenities will likely be a prominent feature of downtown redevelopment.

Transformation for the 22nd Century

This past year, Future Cities Canada, a program of Evergreen, released a series of future scenarios for the city, based on two years of input from a local expert group consisting of architects, planners, designers, academic researchers, Calgary municipal and Alberta provincial government officials, and community leaders. Forty-seven trends were identified, and four scenarios for the city were outlined: *Same Elites*, *Different Pile* (continuation and growth), *Detroit North* (decline and collapse), *Sharing is Caring* (limits and discipline), and *Tourism on Steer-oids* (transformation, despite the cringy title).³⁷⁸

Whatever this road looks like, it will have more and more Indigenous Treaty 7 partners at the table, and eventually at every table. We can take inspiration from the growing push for Indigenous co-management of urban parks and public spaces. The Vancouver Park Board and the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations have initiated a planning process for the development of a 100-year vision and comprehensive plan for Stanley Park.³⁷⁹ Embedded in this long-term planning is seven-generation thinking, the rough Euro-Canadian proxy for which is 'cathedral thinking'. What is Calgary's equivalent multigenerational undertaking?

While Calgary may not have the historic weight of Athens or Sparta, Steer-oidal or not, our polis on the prairies has many roads in front of it. The wisest path is the one that welcomes the most people to the conversation.

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- A commitment to indexing all granting programs to inflation and growth in the budget, starting with 2023/24.
 - An investment in the 2023/24 budget in a strategic Community Prosperity Fund, eligible only to nonprofits, totalling \$300 million over 3 years, to support key priority areas: recruitment and retention of staff; digital transformation; mental health programs for staff and volunteers; and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.
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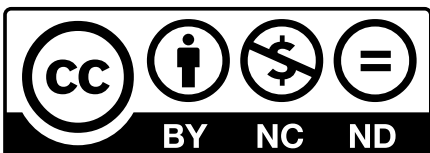
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