POSTCOLONIAL PIPELINE POLITICS | THE PRAIRIES VS. THE REST

Inroads
The Canadian Journal of Opinion | Issue No. 47 | Summer/Fall 2020

COVID-19
HOT SPOTS: STOCKHOLM AND MONTREAL

Why Sweden is not the model: Four reports from Scandinavia
From 'Canada is broken' to 'stronger together'
Philip Resnick's pandemic poems

• Henry Milner: The uninformed, the misinformed and the disinformed
• Thomas Lundén: What do we mean by a nation?
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COVER PHOTO
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Frances Boylston

CIRCULATION MANAGER
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Epixia Technologies
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Goodbye print...

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early March, the contents of this issue of Inroads were taking definitive shape. There was much to write about. Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs’ resistance to construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline across their traditional territory in northern British Columbia, and the cross-Canada protests supporting the chiefs, raised complex issues on which editorial board member Gareth Morley could cast light. We were also exploring aspects of the regional divide between the Prairie provinces and the rest of Canada, starkly revealed in the 2019 federal election.¹

Co-publisher Henry Milner, in his ongoing study of Donald Trump supporters in the United States, had concluded that insufficient attention was being paid to the crucial distinction between uninformed and misinformed voters – not to mention the deliberately disinformed. Co-publisher John Richards was heartened by the results of a little-noticed election in the Indian state of Delhi, which could provide a much-needed shock to the lamentable state of public education, and public services more broadly, in South Asia. The reform party that won the election trounced both major national parties: the currently governing BJP and Congress, in power until 2014. Two Quebec opposition parties were seeking new leaders.² There were some notable books to review.³
Then, with dramatic suddenness, we were required to learn a new vocabulary – quarantine, self-isolation, social distancing, flatten the curve, PPE, N95 – and a new way of life. And to adopt a new agenda for Inroads.

The biggest change is not in the content of Inroads but in the medium itself. Unlike the 46 previous issues, this one is not available in ink-and-paper format. This change has been under discussion for some time, as the proportion of Inroads readers who access our content online has steadily increased, but it was not scheduled to take effect with this issue. However, we determined that, in a context of pandemic restrictions, it was best not to endeavour to move from the design and production stage (in Vancouver) to printing (in Brampton, Ontario) and then to mailing and newsstand distribution. So you may be reading this in the usual web format or in a PDF that looks like the old print edition, but either way it has reached you electronically.

In terms of content, we compare the impact of the pandemic in Scandinavia to that in Canada. In Canada, deaths from COVID-19 have been especially high in Quebec: with less than 23 per cent of Canada’s population, as of the end of May it had recorded more than 60 per cent of the deaths. In Scandinavia, Sweden has almost 80 per cent of the deaths with 38 per cent of Scandinavia’s population. A major factor contributing to Quebec’s high rate is the proportion of the elderly living in long-term care residences, CHSLDs, with 70 per cent of Quebec’s deaths.

Sweden has also seen a substantial number of deaths in long-term care homes, around 50 per cent. But what has drawn most attention is that unlike its Nordic neighbours and most other countries, Sweden did not impose a strict lockdown. We have four reports from Scandinavia about why Sweden acted differently and how it has played out: from Thomas Lundén and Donald Lavery in Stockholm, John Erik Fossum in Oslo and Jan Otto Andersson in Turku, Finland.

Our columnists also look at the COVID-19 crisis from various angles. Julia Smith examines the reasons why, despite a verbal commitment to “evidence-based policy,” it so rarely happens in practice. Arthur Milner asks why so little information was available and so few pointed questions were asked about how governments responded to the pandemic. Reg Whitaker traces the journey from Canada’s being declared broken in the midst of the countrywide pipeline protests in February to our being “stronger together” in the face of the pandemic in April, and has some suggestions about where we go from here.

Also in this issue:

- Mark Jaccard exchanges views with John Richards on issues raised in Jacard’s new book on climate change.
- Eric Shaw reports on how the British Labour Party is changing under its new leader, Keir Starmer.
- Geographer Thomas Lundén explores the complex relationship between state and nation in the context of his home country of Sweden and beyond.

Henry Milner brings us up to date on efforts to achieve electoral reform in Quebec.

The activities of two Inroads editorial board members merit special mention.

Philip Resnick, an eminent political scientist, has been represented in recent issues of Inroads primarily in his other guise as a poet. In an evocative chapter of his new memoir *Itineraries*, Philip writes about his “muse” – the “unseen voice” behind his poetic writing. During the pandemic, Philip’s muse has been especially insistent, and he has responded with some of his best work, casting light on dimensions of this time that go beyond the policy implications. It is fitting that there be an expanded selection of Philip’s poems in this issue.

Dominic Cardy was elected to the New Brunswick legislature as a Progressive Conservative in September 2018. When the Liberal government fell later that fall, Dominic was appointed Education Minister. Until this issue, Dominic still managed to find some time for Inroads. But not this time, and we could not, at first, quite figure out what had changed. It turned out that Dominic, before virtually anyone else in the political realm, had realized that the novel coronavirus emerging in Asia, a part of the world he knows well, would pose a serious threat to public health in Canada. At a caucus retreat on February 24, he roused his colleagues to action with a detailed white paper. Largely as a result of his efforts, New Brunswick acted quickly and effectively. As of the end of May, not a single New Brunswicker had died of COVID-19. Dominic’s prescience and persistence earned him recognition by the National Post as a “hero of the pandemic.”

We will, just this once, forgive Dominic his absence from the Inroads editorial process.

— Bob Chodos

NOTES

1 Stephen Bird analyzes poll results showing polarization between the Prairies and the rest of Canada on energy issues, while Geoff Salomons and Daniel Béland explore why Alberta, uniquely among Canadian provinces, does not have a sales tax.

2 See Eric Montigny on the Quebec Liberals and Anne Michèle Meggs on the Parti Québécois.

3 See Arthur Milner’s review of three books on the political use of data; Mark Pancer on *Deaths of Despair*; Jan Otto Andersson on the “narrow corridor” of liberal democracy; and John Richards on an Indigenous writer’s call to recognize alcoholism as the key dysfunction in First Nation communities.


Remembering a giant of journalism

Jean Daniel represented the best of what might be called journalism’s golden age

By Christian Rioux

It was a time before social media when the quality of ideas actually mattered, before internet trolls and media lynchings. Some day it will probably be called the golden age of journalism. A time when some people believed, along with the philosopher Allan Bloom, that to experience the higher emotions or express complex ideas you needed well-chosen words and an elegant style.

There were a few in the French-language press at that time who represented this elegance of thought and writing. Notable among them was Jean Daniel, who founded Le Nouvel Observateur (now L’Obs) in 1964. Jean Daniel died on February 19 at the venerable age of 99, and France offered him a national tribute the following week. When asked why he had not become a writer or novelist, Jean Daniel replied with his rebellious look: “Because in journalism, I knew I would be the best!” And he was.
When you are born Jewish in an Islamic country and French in the heart of colonial Algeria, there is no escape from current events. Jean Daniel was a friend and compatriot of Albert Camus, and had close ties to the Socialists. Whenever the truth demanded it, he did not hesitate to go against the tide, sometimes even against his own political family. Thus he belonged to that small minority of the left that never succumbed to the totalitarian ideas of Communism. While he loved his homeland, he also did not hesitate to support de Gaulle and the independence of Algeria – even if it meant falling out with his closest friends.

As a correspondent for L'Express, he “covered” decolonization. This brought him to Quebec, long before de Gaulle’s 1967 “Vive le Québec libre!” speech. He was attracted by the first bombs of the Front de Libération du Québec, which saw itself as part of the same current as the Algerian independence struggle. Throughout a career in which he interviewed Kennedy and Castro and was Mitterrand’s confidant, the publisher of Le Nouvel Observateur exercised a kind of moral magisterium in the French and francophone press, prompting this ironic remark from de Gaulle: “You don’t govern France against Le Nouvel Observateur.”

When asked why he had not become a writer or novelist, Jean Daniel replied with his rebellious look: “Because in journalism, I knew I would be the best!” And he was.
Quebecers may have forgotten this, but Jean Daniel always had a certain affection for them. He never went as far as his friend Michel Rocard, and he was not pro-independence, but he would periodically reaffirm that the “Quebec people” had a right to national recognition. “Quebecers are more than a community, they are a people,” he wrote in 1997, in the midst of the post-referendum backlash.

Throughout his career, Jean Daniel tried as best he could to reconcile his left-wing ideals with a visceral attachment to his French identity. Just as he did not succumb to the sirens of Communism, he did not succumb to those of multiculturalism either. “We thought that progress would make the nation obsolete, but the opposite has happened,” he told me in an interview. He even saw the national idea as “the hard, irreducible core of a form of civilization that refuses to disappear.”
Throughout his career, Jean Daniel tried as best he could to reconcile his left-wing ideals with a visceral attachment to his French identity. Just as he did not succumb to the sirens of Communism, he did not succumb to those of multiculturalism either.

In contrast to today’s conventional wisdom, Jean Daniel did not confuse racism, “the justification of an act of violence in the name of the postulated superiority of a race,” with xenophobia, which expresses “a degree of rejection of the foreigner, which may sometimes be motivated only by legitimate concern for one’s own protection.” Himself uprooted from Algeria, he cherished with the philosopher Simone Weil the importance of roots. “I do not believe that the civilization born of the cathedrals and the Revolution can accommodate an inward-looking focus on ethnic communities that I would call ‘differentialist,’” he said. But he was no exception to the rule that no one is a prophet in their own land. Instead of dealing with the problems posed by immigration, “we have hidden our face,” he acknowledged as early as 1992.2

Sensitive to the importance of religions, which he knew had never disappeared, he defined himself as “the most religious of unbelievers.” His self-confidence sometimes spilled over into arrogance, as when he criticized the writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for his anti-Communism – for which he was reprimanded by Raymond Aron.

The older he got, the more Jean Daniel celebrated the importance of the national bond. It was perhaps his way of paying tribute to his mentor Camus, who observed that “each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself.”

Notes

1 Leading Socialist politician and Prime Minister from 1988 to 1991.
2 In his memoir La Blessure (Paris: Grasset, 1992).
We did okay, but where was the information?

By Arthur Milner

The University of Calgary closed its campus on March 13. Classes continued online, but our minds were elsewhere.

Initially, everyone seemed to accept Canada’s political and medical leadership. The usual complaints about Justin Trudeau were muted; British Columbia Chief Medical Officer of Health Bonnie Henry became a folk hero; there were even paeans of praise for Doug Ford. I was a bit suspicious: why was Ontario applying the same rules in Toronto as in Thunder Bay, where there hadn’t been a case of COVID-19 within 1,000 kilometres? But the media were a sea of cooperation and concern. “Flattening the curve” – so as not to overwhelm medical facilities – became the national, provincial and local refrain.

There was some dissent, but it was all about how the lockdown should have been earlier and harder. For example, on the April 10 episode of CBC radio’s The House, host Chris Hall interrogated Health Minister Patti Hajdu, and then Karina Roman welcomed several experts. In a half hour of grievance, there was not a single question about whether the lockdown might have been too harsh.
Most common were government-supporting panic-mongers. CBC Ideas host Nahlah Ayed announced: “People are dying all over the world. Most are old, but many are young. Some were already sick, yet many weren’t sick at all.” ² Natasha Crowcroft, director of the Centre for Vaccine Preventable Diseases at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto, announced on TVO’s The Agenda: “It’s killing young, healthy people as well as old people. It’s not just a question of, you know, a few people who might have been near the end of life anyway.” ³

No one pointed out to Ayed or Crowcroft that while 2,022 deaths were reported in Quebec as of May 1, not a single person under 30 had died. In Ontario, with 1,121 deaths, no one under 20 had died. ⁴ In both provinces, more than 97 per cent of the people who died were over 60 years old. The 3 per cent under 60 who died included people with “preexisting conditions,” but we’re not told how many. I was unable to find out how many healthy people under 60 have died of COVID-19.

Statements like Ayed’s and Crowcroft’s were ubiquitous and went unchallenged. If anyone said something like “almost all the people who die are old and frail,” someone rushed to assure us that “every death is a tragedy” and “young people are dying, too.” There were occasional articles about Sweden’s iconoclasm, but with headlines that rushed to announce that “Sweden’s Relaxed Approach to the Coronavirus Could Already Be Backfiring” (time.com) and “As Sweden’s Death Toll Mounts, Epidemiologists Urge Leaders to Ignore Their Own Public Health Agency” (nationalpost.com). ⁵
But then, one day, everything changed. What happened first? Maybe it was other countries loosening their lockdowns, or Canadian premiers musing about opening things up. Maybe a critical mass of the population realized that we had successfully flattened the curve and hospitals were not inundated.

I don’t have great complaints about how Canada’s various governments handled COVID-19. It was new, and we were learning. And if we overreacted, we at least compensated people who lost their jobs or were otherwise hurt by the pandemic and government action.

I do complain that information wasn’t readily available. Only Quebec’s government site included death statistics by age. Sometimes it felt like we couldn’t be trusted with the facts and were being lied to for our own good. Sometimes it seemed like two sides were drawn: good people willing to shut down everything to save a life; and we the selfish, more concerned about money than health – as if there were no health consequences to the lockdown.

I listened to a half-hour interview conducted in mid-April with Johan Giesecke, Sweden’s former state epidemiologist. Maybe Sweden’s approach was wrong but, as Giesecke said, we won’t know for a year. He suspects that the lockdowns were not helpful (and destructive in
I don’t have great complaints about how Canada’s various governments handled COVID-19. It was new, and we were learning. I do complain that information wasn’t readily available.

many ways) and that the number of deaths will tend to even out among countries. He suggests Sweden and other countries erred by not protecting the most vulnerable – the elderly in large institutions and poorer immigrant communities (but those are hardly new problems). Giesecke sounds like what a public servant should be – low-key, honest, without talking points and not looking over his shoulder.

Did we worry too much about schools when our focus should have been nursing homes – as it is with the annual flu? Giesecke described this as a bad flu season.

Every year, more than 400,000 Canadians die; every month more than 30,000. Flu causes about 3,500 deaths in Canada each year. At the time of writing (May 7), 3,391 of us have died of COVID-19. A lot of nursing homes, a few meatpacking plants, and Montreal and its surroundings seem to be where the virus remains untamed.

Right now, there are a great many people who have positions to defend – that we did the right thing or that we were too soft. I think we did okay under the circumstances but, in the end, when we’ve had a chance to think it over, I think we’ll decide our focus was misplaced.

What will we do next time? Can we shut down the country every time there’s a serious run of the flu? As Albert Camus wrote, “But what does it mean, the plague? It’s life, that’s all.”

Notes

1 https://cbc.mc.tritondigital.com/CBC_THE HOUSE FROM_CBC_RADIO_P/media/thehouse-hNG9HrMn-20200410.mp3
2 Ideas, CBC radio, May 1, 2020, https://22083.mc.tritondigital.com/CBC_IDEAS_P/media-session/a567c29e-3625-4e20-bd6c-6133a3888006/ideas-bgHLYPsU-20200501.mp3
3 The Agenda, TVO, April 20, 2020, https://www.tvo.org/video/when-should-we-restart-the-economy
Evidence and policy: Why the twain rarely meet

By Julia Smith

We live in an age where one of the goals of modern functioning governments is to use evidence to ensure that society is at its best and taxes are responsibly spent. Simultaneously, we live in a society where policy decisions don’t actually consider the evidence on a regular basis. This leads to both continued inequality and lost opportunity.

If that seems a bit esoteric, consider these examples:

- Ample evidence from longitudinal studies shows that investing in early childhood education produces adults who perform better in society and require less in the way of social programs. Furthermore, cutting-edge research reveals the physiological dimension of this effect. New skills learned in early childhood are wired on the brain – these skills are actually encoded in a person’s body, and that coding becomes increasingly inefficient after the age of eight. Yet we still see the early years of education mostly as child-minding rather than citizen-shaping.

- We have comprehensive evidence that companies that use diverse suppliers and have a diverse board perform better on the stock market. Yet many businesses continue to pay no more than lip service to company diversity.
• Evidence demonstrates that migraines cause countries to lose billions of dollars in productivity, not to mention the substantial health care expenditures required to address acute attacks, yet very little research into prevention has been funded.

This is a short list – I could fill a book with other examples. That society is harmed when the evidence isn’t followed is beyond dispute. So why, in so many cases, is the evidence not followed?

Why this doesn’t happen and how it can have major implications is currently unfolding in real time with Canada’s COVID-19 response. Processes that previously took decades are playing out in weeks. As a result, we can isolate some of the structural issues that were previously evident only to those inside the system who could observe moments that occurred over years. Our policy process manifested some striking early failures: underestimating asymptomatic spread, ignoring rapid shifts in epicentres and failing to adequately assess the risk to Canadians.

COVID-19 caught many by surprise – millions of Canadians were not prepared for the lockdown that occurred. Hospitals lacked personal protective equipment (PPE), tests were not available in sufficient numbers and initial actions lagged behind the severity and trajectory of the illness. Given that we went from not having heard of this illness to lockdowns within two and a half months, Canada was far from being the only country where the response lagged. Yet mediocrity should never be our policy goal, and Canada was most definitely not a leader in national-level response.

We know from the documents that were handed over to the House of Commons committee that we failed to capitalize on emerging evidence. By mid-February, we knew that the virus had spread at an aggressive rate through the Diamond Princess cruise ship. By the next week, the World Health Organization had released a fact-finding report from China that highlighted key considerations and stressed the need for speed and decisive actions. Yet even with the scientific evidence rolling in, and real-time case counts such as Worldometer, we failed to take the necessary steps as a country.

For weeks after this, the Public Health Agency of Canada publicly stated that the risk to Canadians was low and that only those who had been to China’s Hubei province needed to be tested and self-isolate. To some extent we were protected from this federal failure to act by federalism – we knew that our cases had shifted to travel from Iran, the United States and Europe only because public health officers in provinces such as British Columbia, Ontario and
Alberta did not follow the federal case definition, but instead tested using broader criteria along with surveillance tracing.

The general public had access to this evidence: in the first global pandemic in an internet-powered world, scientific articles and real-time case trackers were available. Yet public health data lagged behind. Even once the country jumped into action in mid-March, tests were not being approved, advice on asymptomatic spread wasn’t consistent with the evidence and PPE was lacking. Ontario saw reporting challenges where local numbers and provincial numbers were inconsistent because of flaws in the data collection system.

While other countries were innovating and adapting, at the federal level we lacked the cutting-edge push to respond to the evidence that this was an event unlike any in our lifetimes. We waited until people were dying to start the preparation process that should have been carried out in January. We also changed the international travel advice in a matter of days: people who had diligently checked a week earlier would have found no advice that travel posed an unusual risk. And while some provinces forged ahead, certain parts of the response such as travel warnings, border procedures, test approvals and large-scale acquisition of PPE needed to happen federally.
While some provinces forged ahead, certain parts of the response such as travel warnings, border procedures, test approvals and large-scale acquisition of PPE needed to happen federally.

While there may well be blame when this is over, it is also likely that most of the individuals involved – politicians, bureaucrats, doctors and administrators – were doing their best. It was the system that was not at its best. The reasons apply to almost all evidence-based policy problems we face, so COVID-19 allows us to illustrate those and start contemplating how we change when this is over.

Talk about a deadly “once in a century” pandemic has been circulating in health and policy circles for years. Even with miraculous medical advances, novel viruses will emerge and some, such as COVID-19, will be highly contagious and deadly. Our Chief Public Health Officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, was in fact an author of a plan for the government of Canada regarding how the country should spring into action when there is a threat of a pandemic (hint: we didn’t follow it). After the 2003 SARS outbreak there was a reaction phase where PPE was stockpiled, but those stockpiles were not managed and many items in them had expired.

So even though the evidence base strongly suggested the need to be ready for an event that would happen in the future, this was not taken seriously. This illustrates one of the first challenges to evidence-based policy: policy problems are seldom aligned with election cycles. Evidence suggesting that you should spend now to prevent something later is often overlooked. Decision-making cycles, for the bureaucrats and the politicians they support, are focused on demonstrating impact in the short term, not preventing problems in the long term.

The second problem that emerged clearly in the pandemic is the fact that decision-makers are often shielded from key information. If ministers are just given a copy-and-pasted line about the risk to Canadians being low, they cannot make informed decisions on what stands before them. The tendency for notes to be generic and watered down is a product of the bureaucratic process. The drafter of a note often only has under an hour, with an expectation of perfection. Then, up to eight people review and edit the document, often with less situational awareness and expertise. What comes out the other side tends to be not that useful to the person receiving it. There is a lot of boilerplate information and not a lot of synthesized emerging evidence.

The obsession with perfect notes means most of the subject-matter experts don’t even actually get to communicate to the decision-makers what they consider most important. Instead, their input is filtered through senior managers who often take a risk-averse approach, editing for what they think the politician wants to hear, not what the evidence suggests. In New Brunswick,
this was concerning enough that the political side went about gathering the evidence themselves and sharing it with the bureaucracy – an illustration of a fundamental failure of the system.

Missing were the kind of documents referred to in security contexts as situational reports, daily digests of the evolving evidence. A situational report is meant to be timely and concise and contain the important details. It can quickly highlight key changes in a rapidly evolving situation, ensuring that everyone involved has a similar understanding of where things stand.

The third problem is that the trifecta of privacy/procurement/security has kept the government in a state where it cannot actually use all of the data tools available. An exponentially growing global virus with unprecedented research capacity thrown at it can only be understood with big data tools and real-time data updates. This led to various situations where the briefings given by public health officials contained information that conflicted with what was available publicly – and the public information turned out to be right.

That our officials were functioning on a delay became painfully evident, even as we all knew speed was of the essence. Updating websites once a week or with a few days’ delay is not acceptable in this age – nor is it necessary to go manually through data inputs as everyone outside of government can develop and use real-time tools. Security, privacy and appropriate procurement are all of the utmost importance, but they can’t stand in the way of solutions that prevent people from dying. This is true not just in this crisis but across issues.

Finally, our government structure itself is not built for evidence-based policy. Bureaucratic reform has mostly just turned a system that came out of the 1880s into a Frankenstein monster. Our departmental structures, hierarchies, decision-making trees and work flows just don’t work in the internet world. While we frequently hear the phrase “whole-of-government,” what that tends to mean is more edits of documents, more lost time, more stress and no clear outcomes. The current method allows for some disaster checks and a fair amount of wordsmithing, but not for multifaceted evidence bases to see the light of day. The effects of this weakness could be seen in Canada’s haphazard response to this crisis. If we had no border limitations, why did we not have other checks and precautions in place? How did we go from hardly any travel warnings to everyone needing to come home immediately?

If we actually want to be able to build evidence-based solutions, we need a reorganization of government, especially on the policy side so that everyone essential to building the evidence base can be pulled together onto one team. Proper government organization could have allowed rapid collaboration in responding to the
pandemic. It would also make a difference on issues ranging from child care and domestic violence to climate change and international trade strategies.

This crisis has laid bare what most bureaucrats know: we are not built for proactive adaptation to the evidence base. We have seen some rays of light – from British Columbia, with a strong public health officer, strong collaboration between the health bureaucracy and the politicians and rapid gathering of evidence, to New Brunswick, where the kick from the political side started the discussion by pulling together the evidence when there was concern that federal direction was lacking. At the same time there are numerous danger signs: from the rising acceptance of conspiracy theories and antivax propaganda that encourages citizens to actively distrust the evidence base to missteps in the reopening phase where areas with high caseloads are making choices based on pressure rather than science. I hope the post-mortem doesn’t just focus on pandemic response but takes a more holistic look at government structures for problem solving.
March 2020 Canada and the world, like Alice, stepped through a looking glass and into another dimension, a world so strange and unprecedented that no one could find a historical analogy that did not break down on closer examination. There was the plague that devasted ancient Athens during the Peloponnesian War in 430 BCE; the Black Death of the 1340s that killed perhaps 60 per cent of the European population; and the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918–19 that may have killed 50 million people, more than perished during the preceding First World War. None really resembles the particular challenge of COVID-19 or provides templates for responses.

There were famous chroniclers of such past catastrophes, from Thucydides to Boccaccio to Dafoe to Camus, yet none seemed to speak from their experience to the utterly unique situation of an entire world going into voluntary or involuntary lockdown, deliberately shutting much normal economic activity; nor to a bizarre realm in which from one day to the next governments could transform from near-silent shareholders in a globalized corporate enterprise to Leviathan states instantly funding and taking command of a private sector that, for the most part, had been regulated not by government but by the market.
Like Yeats after the Easter Rising of 1916, pundits sententiously declared, “All changed, changed utterly.” Perhaps; perhaps not. There are, however, some things that should change after this searing experience.

Trump and Brexit populism rode a wave of suspicion of science and expertise. Remember Michael Gove dismissing ironclad arguments of economists about havoc in the wake of Brexit: we “have had enough of experts”? Now life and death literally hang on the expertise of scientists and health professionals. Surely this renewed trust in expertise should carry over into the post-COVID world. Surely climate change deniers will give way to the professional opinion of the scientific community that the world is heading for catastrophe if we do not get to net-zero carbon emissions.

For years we have heard tireless reiterations of the neoliberal theme that government is the problem, not the solution; that private enterprise does everything better than bureaucrats; and that deregulation and marketization are the keys to good public policy. Depredations on the tax base by the rich create a hollowed-out state, which is then pointed to as evidence of public sector incompetence.

And then comes the plague. Suddenly everyone – corporations, unions, big and small business, workers, rich, poor – rush to the comforting arms of the state. And the state, astonishingly to those who believed the antigovernment rhetoric, delivers quickly and effectively. Ottawa rolled out massive relief programs of unprecedented complexity and had money flowing into people’s bank accounts within days. When coverage gaps were pointed out, adjustments were made: the public service could be not only efficient but resilient in the face of overarching crisis, even when bureaucrats had to work from home. Surely the performance of the state, matched against the manifest incapacity of the unassisted private sector to cope, should be a salutary lesson to free market evangelists.

Neoliberalism went hand in hand with unchecked globalization. This COVID crisis has brought home the danger posed by extended global supply chains and “just in time” delivery. Globalization had led to concentration of food production and delivery in a small number of multinational conglomerates with resulting dependence on food imports, and now a crisis in Canadian food security. Surely the post-COVID era should see serious efforts at shortening And then comes the plague. Suddenly everyone – corporations, unions, big and small business, workers, rich, poor – rush to the comforting arms of the state. And the state, astonishingly to those who believed the antigovernment rhetoric, delivers quickly and effectively.
critical supply chains, ensuring adequate inventories of crucial products and refocusing on local food production.

Neoliberalism had notoriously encouraged greater inequality, with the corporate elites paying themselves multimillion-dollar “earnings” and “performance bonuses” while a state starved of resources cut back and privatized social services, providing derisory wages and employment conditions for those who work in the service sector. The COVID crisis highlighted the crucial and heroically self-sacrificing role of health care workers who put their own lives on the line daily in defence of the public.

In Quebec and Ontario in particular, it also shone a harsh spotlight on the shockingly substandard conditions in long-term care facilities, many run for profit, where COVID raged out of control. Seniors are most at risk from the virus, but the ghastly contagion and death rate could have been prevented had conditions not been as Dickensian. Surely the future should see a redistribution of resources to reflect decent remuneration and working conditions for those whose services truly are essential. Surely we should see proper public funding for essential social services like seniors’ care, decoupling of these services from the for-profit sector and an end to simply warehousing the elderly who cannot afford premium care.

Politics in liberal democracies have increasingly in recent years been characterized by relentless partisanship; by the “permanent campaign”; by the commodification of politics and the reduction of citizens to consumers; by the active fostering by politicians and partisan media of social distrust and incivility and aggression in public debate. The COVID crisis has highlighted in ways not seen since wartime that Margaret Thatcher was never so wrong as when she notoriously declared that “there’s no such thing as society.” Surely this crisis will have brought home that there is a collective good that transcends individual self-interest, that people will rise to the challenge of doing their best to help their fellow citizens in adversity, and that partisan politics as usual must change to reflect a greater sense of common purpose, uniting rather than dividing people.

Surely and should do not connote certainty, however. There is nothing assured about the way Canada will come out of this crisis.

We need only look south of the border to see how lessons may not be learned. Divisive populism and destructive neoliberalism continue apace in the United States. The Trump response to the downside of globalization has been reversion to 1930s-style nationalist protectionism and issuance of threats against other countries, precluding the kind of globalism that is still needed: international cooperation against the virus. Trump has deliberately promoted disunity over unity,
set groups of people against one another and relentlessly sought to extract partisan advantage from the crisis. The result: instead of any coherent national strategy, there is chaos; instead of a common national purpose, there are right-wing thugs carrying assault weapons and even invading state legislatures and threatening elected officials, demanding the end of lockdowns.

Canada sets an admirable contrast to American carnage, not only combating the virus more effectively (with nine times Canada’s population, the United States at the end of April had 30 times the number of reported COVID fatalities) but establishing generally nonpartisan direction with large-scale voluntary compliance with guidelines for appropriate behaviour. But the best contrast with this newfound Canadian unity is not with our neighbours but with ourselves, on the very eve of the onset of the pandemic.

When every television network in the country simultaneously broadcast Canadian musicians, artists and athletes all contributing emotive voices to a collective performance dubbed “Stronger Together” on April 26, it is wrenching to take our minds back just two months, to February 28. On that date the National Post published a poll under the blaring headline “Canada is broken”:

*In a time of widespread disagreement and ever-increasing polarization, there remains a bitter solidarity among Canadians in the belief that the government doesn’t know what it’s doing. In the wake of regional discontent from the western provinces and blockades jamming up the country’s rail network, a towering majority of Canadians [69 per cent of Canadians, rising to 83 per cent in Alberta] agree with the statement, “Right now, Canada is broken.”*

A few days later another National Post piece spelled out that “Canada is broken because Justin Trudeau broke it.” Columnist Chris Selley followed this up with, “The Fathers of Confederation might well find consensus on the word ‘broken’ to describe Canada, 153 years on. Surely 26 million Canadians can’t be wrong.”

Apparently they could. Two months later, the “bitter solidarity” of distrust in government had been transformed into an even more “towering majority” who expressed faith that the same government would see them through a crisis that made Alberta discontent and rail blockades seem trivial in comparison.

Briefly revisiting the “Canada is broken” moment may also point to the kind of Canada we might expect when we finally step back through the looking glass into a post-COVID era.
Some of the concern about the state of the country was sparked by the widespread protests, including rail blockades, supporting the opposition of some hereditary Wet’suwet’en chiefs to the Coastal GasLink pipeline crossing their traditional unceded territory. The complexities of the legal issues surrounding Wet’suwet’en territorial and governance claims are examined in detail by Gareth Morley in this issue.4

The magnitude and extent of the protests, and the economic damage and inconveniences caused by rail blockades, appear disproportionate to the causes, intensified by the way Indigenous sovereignty claims were conflated with the environmental case against liquefied natural gas, despite being separate issues. The federal and British Columbia governments are continuing to negotiate territorial and governance issues with the Wet’suwet’en while the pipeline proceeds. While reconciliation with Indigenous peoples remains a leading goal of public policy, working out Indigenous consent to megaprojects will be complex and difficult when First Nations are always divided as much as non-Native Canadians on environment-vs.-economy issues. But Canada is hardly “broken” by these difficulties.

The other, larger, problem supposedly threatening to break Canada, the alienation of Alberta (now joined by Saskatchewan) from Ottawa and central Canada, is a very old story.5 Most recently it has risen to new heights as the Alberta petrostate has seen the future of its leading staple product, oil sands bitumen, called into question. Under Stephen Harper, a prime minister from Calgary, the oil sands were declared to be the leading driver of Canadian economic development. When global oil prices started falling, oils sands profits stalled. Alberta identified completing pipelines to tidewater and export markets in Asia as the answer.

But when Northern Gateway was shelved and Trans Mountain ran into environmental and Indigenous opposition on the B.C. coast, Alberta pointed the finger at environmentalists and federal and B.C. governments concerned with environmental protection as the enemies of Alberta. B.C. Premier John Horgan and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau became hated figures to many Albertans. Even Trudeau buying Trans Mountain when its Texan developers backed out did nothing to allay Alberta rage.

It is now often said in Alberta that Trudeau’s secret agenda is to destroy the Alberta economy (why any prime minister would harbour such a politically self-defeating agenda beggars the imagination, but apparently not that of conspiracy theorists from the fever swamps of the Alberta far right). When the Liberals committed to the introduction of a carbon tax as the centrepiece of
a national climate strategy, suspicion of Ottawa reached paranoid levels. Then the 2019 election saw the return of a Trudeau government with the support of three other parties equally or more committed to the carbon tax and to serious climate action, while Alberta and Saskatchewan returned crushing majorities to a Tory party fully backing Alberta. Canada, it seemed, was breaking apart. “Western” (sic) separatism was bubbling up across the Prairies.

In the real world, even if some environmental activists do seek the closure of the oil sands, majority opinion across the country has clung to the belief that the environment and economic development could be balanced, as reflected in the decision to put Trans Mountain under public ownership. Whether any viable compromise might ever have been found is now a moot point, as the pandemic has thrown all calculations about the future of oil and gas into confusion. Global lockdown has led to a drastic drop in energy consumption and resulting oversupply, while a Saudi-led price war had already driven down North American oil to uncompetitive levels. North American prices briefly went negative, with the surreal result that on one day producers would have had to pay buyers $37 a barrel to take the stuff off their hands.

This situation will not endure and eventually there will be a price rebound. But it is doubtful that it will ever rebound to levels that make the Alberta oil sands a profitable producer. In fact, there were abundant signs pre-COVID that the oil sands’ day was done. All foreign investment, including from some oil giants, had already fled the field, and sovereign funds and other big institutional investors had divested oil sands stocks. Ethical concerns may have played a small part, but the larger reason was hard financial calculation: the world was transitioning away from fossil fuels for reasons of self-preservation. The oil sands, being among the most expensive (and dirty) sources of crude in the world, are roadkill in the global downsizing of the carbon economy. The COVID pandemic has given even more impetus to the move away from the petro-economy: this virus is only a preview of the horrific damage the earth can wreak upon a human species fouling its own nest and upending the delicate balance of nature.

Even if there exists a transitional period when oil is still in demand, consider that the Saudis, with low production costs, can break even at a price in the low $20s a barrel. The break-even point for oil sands bitumen is the mid-$50s. For exports to be reliably profitable, prices would have to be in the $60 range, which is the aspirational forecast for Jason Kenney’s 2020 Alberta budget. Energy analysts are not predicting anything like $60 oil in the foreseeable future. No wonder Kinder Morgan backed out of Trans Mountain and Teck Resources dumped Premier Kenney’s pampered Frontier oil sands development (which posited $80–$90 a barrel over 20 years!).

The bottom line is that the real enemy of the Alberta petro-economy is not found among the Liberals, Greens, socialists, federal bureaucrats and environmentalists of Albertan demonology. *The real enemy is the market*. There is great irony in this, in light of the Alberta Conservatives’ vociferous free enterprise ideology, not to speak of their constant self-congratulation at their genius at finding oil in the ground. One is tempted to sneer that those who live by free enterprise
die by free enterprise, but that would be both ungracious and self-defeating. The collapse of the petro-economy will wreak havoc not only on Albertans but on the entire Canadian economy. This is of course only intensified by the downward spiral induced by the pandemic lockdown. Not surprisingly, Alberta is already coming back to Ottawa, this time not as a threatening creditor but as supplicant, grateful for whatever assistance is offered. Ottawa initially offered the same assistance to laid-off oil and gas workers that it offers all other laid-off workers. It also tied specific aid to the industry to environmental purposes: cleaning up abandoned oil wells, for instance. This has won support from both environmentalists and the Alberta government.

What must be resisted are demands that good federal money be thrown after bad into the pit of existing big oil investment in the oil sands. Instead, there is the major challenge ahead of assisting the transition of the Alberta economy to much greater reliance on alternative non-fossil energy sources (geothermal, wind, sun, etc.), toward a greener economy rather than a petro-economy.

This will certainly not be easy, and may be very disruptive and extremely expensive, especially in the early stages. But the pandemic crisis offers an opportunity along these lines that would otherwise have been more difficult to achieve. The transition of Alberta toward a greener future should be part of the renewed common purpose coming out of the crisis, showing that Canada is in no way broken, but indeed stronger together.

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Notes

5 See the articles in the “What Makes the Prairie Provinces Different?” section in this issue, pp. 67.
Quebec takes a step toward electoral reform

By Henry Milner

Last October, Quebec’s Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government introduced its promised electoral reform legislation, Bill 39, and in February the National Assembly’s Commission on Institutions held public hearings on the bill. In its brief, the Mouvement Démocratie Nouvelle (MDN), the pro-reform lobby that has long campaigned for electoral reform, complimented the government for living up to its commitment. However, it expressed disappointment with some important aspects of the proposed law.

Bill 39 sets out a version of a mixed compensatory electoral system for Quebec, based on the regional version used in Scotland, known as mixed-member proportional or MMP. In a mixed compensatory system, the territory is divided into electoral regions, each comprising a certain number of electoral districts. Consider a region which currently has 10 seats: under a mixed compensatory system there would be six districts and four compensatory seats. Each voter casts two votes: one for a party and one for a district candidate. If a given party wins 30 per cent of the party votes in the region, it is entitled to a total of three seats. If its candidate came first in two of the district seats, the person at the top of its regional list would be allocated one of the four compensatory seats.

The same proportional principle would apply to all parties – in practice there are complications in the allocation of seats that are resolved through what is called the d’Hondt method after the 19th-century Belgian mathematician who described it. Other things being
equal, a party would need roughly 7.5 per cent of the vote to be allocated a list seat. Moreover, an element of disproportionality is built in. For example, party “A” could win all six districts with 50 per cent of the regional party vote – an infrequent but by no means unheard of eventuality. In that case, party “A” would be overrepresented by one seat, and one too few list seats would be left to fully compensate the other parties.

In Quebec, the proposal endorsed in principle by all the opposition parties, including the CAQ before it won the 2018 election, included keeping the number of members of the National Assembly (MNAs) constant at 125, creating 80 district seats (more or less based on the boundaries of the federal constituencies in Quebec) and 45 compensatory regional ones. Unlike in Scotland, the regions would differ in number of MNAs to reflect the dispersion of the population. It was accepted as inevitable that because the far-flung regions would have few seats to use for compensatory purposes, overall proportionality would be reduced. This left one issue unresolved: by keeping the total number at 125, the extra seats needed to make compensation possible in the least populated regions would result in an even larger average number of voters per MNA in the more densely populated regions, especially Montreal.

Originally, the CAQ did not intend to require approval of the proposal in a referendum, but it changed its mind and has planned a referendum to coincide with the 2022 Quebec election – in good part because many of its MNAs wanted to be certain that the reform would not be implemented in time for that election. While this was disappointing, given that in referendum campaigns in other provinces opponents raised exaggerated fears that led to the reform being rejected, supporters of a mixed compensatory system tacitly agreed to this concession as the price of getting any change through the CAQ caucus.

More disappointing were Bill 39’s two major amendments to the original concept. The first and craftiest is what is being called a prime au vainqueur – a bonus for the party that comes in first in each region. This is done by using only half of the district seats won in the calculation of compensation, and thus reducing the proportionality of the outcome. While this is rather complicated to explain (and thus to defend), we can illustrate it using the previous example. The CAQ formula would have party “A”’s six district seats treated as if they were only three. In applying the d’Hondt formula, its 50 per cent would then entitle it to one of the four list seats, giving it 70 per cent of the seats, and leaving only three seats, or 30 per cent, for the remaining parties that shared the other 50 per cent of the vote.

A second and equally important change was the decision to set the threshold of overall popular support needed by a party to benefit from the compensatory seats at 10 per cent, rather than the standard for proportional systems of 2 to 5 per cent. Since no country except Turkey, hardly a model of democracy, uses such a high threshold, we have good reason to expect the government to concede on this measure. Apparently, not having found any support for its prime aux vainqueur, it may drop this provision as well.
As a longtime student of proportional systems and advocate of electoral reform, I presented my own brief. In it I argued for elimination of the rule that would allow a candidate to run only in a district or on a party list, but not both. Apart from the advantage of recruiting stronger candidates, I referred to experience in Germany in particular where legislators elected from a list typically saw their role as being available to people in the districts in which they (unsuccessfully) ran. This made it possible for German voters who supported a party other than that of the candidate who won in their district to contact the office of a member from their preferred party for information or assistance.

To respond to fears raised of proportional systems leading to governmental instability, the MDN brief showed this is not the case where systems like the mixed compensatory one proposed are used. The brief also suggested that the reform include the provision used in Germany known as the constructive vote of no confidence, which requires efforts to bring down the government to take the form of a vote of confidence in an alternative one.

It remains to be seen what will happen with the proposed amendments. The Liberals, at this writing, remain opposed to the reform as such. In the last election, as several times in the past, the Liberals received too few votes in francophone regions to win more than a handful of seats there and wasted many votes in the anglophone and allophone districts in and around Montreal. It may be that the new Liberal leader, Dominique Anglade (see Eric Montigny’s article on page 97 in this issue), a child of Haitian immigrants who is especially sensitive to this ghettoization of her party in multicultural Montreal, is open to discussion on this issue.

Conversely, the CAQ found itself in power without any representation in the anglophone and allophone districts. Not only did they waste the votes they were able to win there, but they had no incentive to invest scarce resources in appealing to this electorate.

Adopting the mixed compensatory system would lessen this territory-based divide. The differences between Quebec’s communities are real; the last thing we need is an electoral system that exacerbates them. Yet the pandemic has put electoral reform, like much else, on hold. The MDN is redoubling efforts to make sure that the government’s inaugural address at the start of the fall session of the National Assembly will confirm its commitment to passing Bill 39.

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Pandemic poems

By Philip Resnick

Covid-19

Plague has always had a fascination
for those who map the subterranean, the macabre,
black bile overflowing, feverish gaze,
bloated corpses, tumbrels rolling through medieval towns,
death in Venice,
love in the age of cholera.
So it is with the conoravirus,
spreading its bat-like wings across the planet,
transforming species that had become our prey
into avenging angels,
hugging the elderly to their chests,
surfacing where least expected,
turning the global economy topsy-turvy
and the best-laid plans of empire builders
into crumbling sand.

February 28
The End of Time

For centuries, apocalyptical and Old Believers prostrated themselves, lacerating flesh and entrails, convinced the great upheaval around them had some higher purpose, that out of chaos and destruction a New Jerusalem, for those who had abjured their sins, would ultimately emerge.

Subsequently, as traditional beliefs were cast aside, new credos arose with their adherents, having beheaded kings and overthrown czars, certain a new age could begin and humanity shed the vices that ignorance and accumulated privileges had instilled and petrified.

Now that such beliefs have also bitten the dust, and a new globalist disposition come to the fore, seers amongst us and myriads suddenly living in fear, sense climate wars, droughts, and unleashed pestilence foreshadowing the end of time.

March 19
Globalization’s Children

We later civilizations – we too know that we are mortal.

— Paul Valéry, 1919

It seemed obvious enough,
for those who had bloodied themselves in the trenches,
seen the swath of carnage
bell-towers and market squares had endured,
millions dying from the accursed flu,
as though a vengeful god
were calling in a sinful continent’s debts.
What about us, globalization’s children,
spared the previous century’s major wars,
wearing our affluence like a fashion statement
from a new-age couturier,
convinced the arrow would always point in one direction, upwards,
and the merry-go-round would never stop
for us lucky ones who’d managed to embark?

March 23
On a Passage in Lenin

There are decades when nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen.

— Lenin

True enough where revolutions are concerned,
the French, the Russian for starters.
No less true for financial crises,
1929, 2008, to name two of the biggies.
Plagues too have had their cataclysmic high points,
the Black Death, the Columbian Exchange, the Spanish flu.
Still early days for the coronavirus,
no seers at the city gates or on distant Judaeans hilltops
able to foretell
just how or when it will evolve or peak,
or how much of the societal carapace will crumble underneath.
But we sense,
much like animals before a hurricane or tsunami,
that sometime in mid-March
the earth turned on its axis
and that those living through it
will never knowingly efface the moment.
March 25
Contagion

Into the notable city of Florence there came the death-dealing pestilence which had some years before appeared in parts of the East.

— Boccaccio, The Decameron

“Of what use is the past?” the moderns asked, secure in the comforts of the present day and the promise of a future still at hand.

“Of what use the aged,” the millennials chimed in, “they who have enjoyed the earth’s fruits these many years, and refuse to clear the way for those now come of age?”

“Of what use the homeless and the poor,” the well-off complained, “they who spread vermin in their clothes and hair while we must take shelter behind the ramparts of our homes?”

“Of what use your pristine beaches and winter holidays” the ascetics railed, “when the pillars of your temples and pleasure palaces have come crashing down?”

“Of what use your lamentations?” the sybarites replied, “let us drink and eat and copulate our fill while we party through the night.”

March 26
Fear

You see it in their faces,
in the quick manoeuvres to step aside
on sidewalks and on trails,
in the panicked emails,
the endless stories in the papers
or posted on the Web.

Pandora’s box has been pried open,
spectres one had thought wrestled to the ground
by scientific research, biotech,
haunt the deserted boardrooms and chancelleries
from one OECD capital to the next.

Half the planet has gone into hibernation,
even as the other half, the poorer half,
awaits its turn,
hospital wards already overflowing
with the prostrate, the skeletal, the short of breath.

Through the ages fear has worn many masks,
conquering armies, devastating famines,
despots doing in their subjects with a mere flick of the wrist,
but its most primal form as always
remains the fear of death.

March 27
Nemesis

There had been intonations of a bubbly stock exchange,
target cities – Venice, Barcelona, Amsterdam –
besieged by tourist crowds,
cruise ships too big to dock,
real estate markets too frothy for mere proles.
The game seemed so humongous it would never cease,
the moneyed folks too powerful to fail,
their chains of command spanning continents and seas,
dwarfing nation-states along the way.
True, climate change frayed at the edges,
a host of civil wars raged on,
fraught refugees and asylum seekers
vying for a brief fifteen minutes in the sun.
So when the virus made its first appearance
in the then little-known city of Wuhan,
it seemed a minor nuisance,
a freakish zoonotic passage from bats to humankind.
The rest is history
as the global skein unravelled,
country after country falling prey
to a long forgotten scourge, the plague.
Nemesis, vengeful goddess,
through a tiny agent
was stirring from the depths,
sending the global circus careening to a close.
March 28
The Lucky Generation

We called ourselves the lucky generation,
in many ways we were,
spared the wars, the dole,
the diseases, the back-breaking toil,
that has been our predecessors’ lot
and that of the myriads who had come before them.
There was comfort in knowing we could choose
which college to enrol in,
which profession we might enter,
what city or country to put roots down in,
where we might holiday winter or summer
or retire to when our working lives were over.
There were passing clouds in the sky,
Islamic disruptions here and there,
the occasional economic downturn,
hints of glaciers melting or sea levels rising,
but for the large part problems
the millennials and their offspring would have to bear.
And suddenly we learned how quickly the script could be rewritten,
carefully constructed stage sets taken down,
the myths of exponential growth,
globalization as some kind of magic key,
affluence as a guarantee of personal immunity,
reduced to tatters.
The old Greek precept which Solon had first uttered
had stood the test of time:
“Do not count yourself fortunate until your final day.”

April 4
Confinement

Half the planet, including its perennial high-flyers,
courtesy of the spiked intruder,
has discovered the fine points of social distancing,
of living in a closed space, 23/24 on 7,
even as the sun is warming up the earth,
the trees and shrubs are burgeoning,
and normality of a sort
will eventually reemerge from its cocoon.
A mere facsimile
for what the unjustly imprisoned
would have taken to be their lot,
zeks with their infected lungs in the Gulag's frigid wastes,
les damnés de la terre the Internationale had once extolled.
For a brief moment,
the Gatsby set has met the lower depths.

April 15
In the Season of the Plague

In the season of the plague
a global assembly was convened
with eminent philosophers, theologians
and assorted illuminati
to guide humanity out of its downward spiral.

Sitting a row apart from one another,
the first intervenor held up The Qur’an
with cries of Allahu Akbar reverberating through the hall,
the second The New Testament
with echoes of the Matthäus-Passion as a refrain,
next an angry tribune, abjuring hedge funds
and rapacious bankers, waved a copy of Das Kapital,
with a more smartly dressed opponent
preaching the gospel according to Adam Smith,
followed by a poker-faced emissary extolling The Prince
along with choice bits from Kongfuzi’s Analects,
even as a dissident freshly released
trumpeted The Social Contract’s enduring beliefs.

So the debate raged on for days,
ecologists, virologists,
semiologists, psychologists joining the fray,
until the assembly by now much depleted,
having reached no agreement, was duly disbanded,
as a lowly cleaner, a Dalit by birth,
disinfecting the cavernous hall and latrines,
scattered herbs from her village and chanted full-throated
mantras to exorcise the abominable plague.

April 20
A Litany of Plagues

*The Athenian plague 430 BCE. 100,000 dead*
*that did Pericles in*
*The Justinian plague 541–2 CE. 25–100 million dead*
*that helped do the Roman Empire in*
*The Bubonic plague 1347–51*
*that did 25–50 million Europeans in*
*The Cocoliziti plague – perhaps TB – 1545–8*
*that did 15 million indigenous Mexicans in*
*The great plague of London. 1665–6. 100,000 dead*
*The plague of Marseille. 1720–3. 120,000 dead*
*The Russian plague. 1889–90. 1 million dead*
*The Spanish flu. 1918–19. 20–50 million dead*
*The Asian flu. 1956–8. 1–3 million dead*
*AIDS. since 1981. 32 million dead*
*SARS, MERS, EBOLA – tiny numbers as their toll*
*COVID-19*

*Humanity has had a long-time fling*
*with lice, rats, marmots, pigs, and bats*
*and the bugs always win.*

*(Inspired by an article and chart in Le Point, “Et les puces precipitèrent la chute de l’empire romain,” April 16, 2020)*

April 22
Checks and Balances

In the ideal republic,
quoth Polybius, Montesquieu or Madison,
power must check power.
The kingly one is too dangerous
to entrust to an unchecked figure
all too quick to trample
over both sacred and profane
with a praetorian guard at his command.
The legislative, with too weak an authority in control,
can quickly overswell its banks
and divvy up within its own encrusted ranks
the spoils of office.
Judges for their part,
given too free a rein,
can use the instruments of self-interested interpretation
to impose rules
where lawmakers never deigned to venture.
A fine doctrine for fair-weather times.
But when the times are rife
with strife, pestilence, and fear,
and citizens too bitter and divided
to recall the underlying need
to show a minimum of regard for one another,
how easy for the demagogue, the providential leader,
to overwhelm the forces of restraint
and impose an iron rule
from which republics cannot easily recover.

June 2
In late March, we learned that Sweden, in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, did not intend to “lock down” the population and mandate social isolation. Instead, Anders Tegnell, Sweden’s head government epidemiologist, and Johan Giesecke, Tegnell’s mentor, argued that a modest set of regulations (for example, protection of centres for the elderly) and good common sense among Swedes was preferable. Sweden became a notable outlier in the global fight against the novel coronavirus.

Many speculated, as did Simon Rosenblum on the Inroads listserv, that the Swedes were “only fooling themselves and will pay a price for their delay in implementing the necessary public health measures.” More widely, we wondered how this “model” progressive country could be lined up with Donald Trump and Brazil’s Bolsonaro in resisting lockdown. Why was Sweden deviating so dramatically from its Nordic and northern European cousins? This was unexpected. The Nordic countries have much in common and are closely linked through binding Nordic and European cooperation, with a long history of policy learning from one another. As John Erik Fossum notes in this section, they share high levels of trust in government, which plays an active and transparent role in macroeconomic governance and public welfare to attain a fair and equitable distribution of benefits and burdens.

The COVID-19 pandemic tests the very fibres of modern societies and economies, including the four Nordics (Norway,
Sweden, Denmark and Finland – Iceland is not included here because of its small size). In comparing their responses to it, we can gain an insight into the resilience and pertinence of the Nordic model. And Inroads is in an exceptional position to do so. As regular readers know, over the years we have published many insightful contributions on relevant issues from well-informed correspondents in the Nordic countries. I approached four of them, and what follows is based on their responses updated through to late April.

They were asked to describe the steps taken in their own countries and in the Nordics more widely, and, in that context, address the various aspects, as well as outcomes, of Sweden’s approach. To begin, we should note that numbers may more accurately reflect reality in Sweden than in other countries. Every Swede has a 10-digit personal number and is required to self-identify with this number, validated by an ID card, at every contact with authorities and medical professionals. This means that Sweden systematically checks the list of people who have tested positive for the virus against the population register. Every time the government discovers that someone who had the virus has died, that person is registered as a COVID-19 death if it happened within 30 days of the diagnosis – even if the cause of death was cancer or a heart attack. Other countries typically only count a death as caused by COVID-19 if a doctor so concludes.

We should also note that the proportion of immigrants in the Swedish population, at about 15 per cent, is larger than in most European countries. In Norway and Denmark, immigrants make up roughly 10 per cent of the population, while in Finland the proportion of immigrants is half what it is in Sweden. Still, the comparison with its neighbours makes clear that Swedish numbers, as presented in the chart, are higher than they should be. And

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Source: Worldometer, accessed June 2, 2020

* I do not include Iceland given its small size (365,000).
we want to know why. It is not, as in certain countries with comparable numbers, that Sweden lacks for hospital beds or ventilators. In fact, the number of COVID-19 patients newly admitted to intensive care units stabilized as early as March 23. Quite early, in mid-April, the Swedish government announced that testing was to be ramped up to a respectable 50,000 to 100,000 tests per week.

For a Canadian from Montreal, there is something almost déjà vu in these numbers. If we average the Nordic numbers, they are similar to Canada’s. And Quebec is similar to Sweden.

There is a clue in these numbers that helps us make sense of Sweden’s results. Roughly half of Sweden’s deaths are in the Stockholm region, as is the case for Montreal vis-à-vis Quebec. Sweden proved especially vulnerable because, like Quebec, a large proportion of the elderly in the metropolitan area are in care centres, which are often staffed by new immigrants. While Quebec’s numbers were especially high because many of these workers work in more than one institution, the Swedish high numbers primarily reflect the fact that many of the staff were from communities living in densely populated ethnic suburbs – the places where people were least likely to follow, or even be aware of, suggested guidelines about physical distancing and self-isolation.

At the time of writing, Tegnell and Giesecke have resorted to the argument that, in the long run, after second and maybe third waves of COVID-19 cases, Sweden’s strategy will prove to be as efficient in saving lives as a lockdown.
Why? In Sweden, a higher share of the population will have been exposed to the virus than in locked down countries, and this will provide an element of “herd immunity.” Finally, they predict that, in locked down countries, public support for unlocking will rise and generate intense conflict with those favouring lockdown. Swedish authorities may be right, but this seems doubtful. Second-wave fatalities in other countries are likely to be better kept in check since there will have been much more testing and contact tracing by then. In the first three months of 2020, Sweden’s excess of deaths compared to the same period in 2019, as well as its decline in its GDP, was greater than that of its neighbours. This is not to suggest that all Swedish choices were erroneous: it seems likely that keeping younger students in school was, on balance, a good decision, since evidence shows that periods of schooling lost by children with poorly educated parents and without access to elite schools are never made up.

What follows, in edited and updated form, are contributions from John Erik Fossum, Thomas Lundén, Donald Lavery and Jan Otto Andersson on and off the Inroads listserv in the first three weeks of April, ordered by country rather than by the date they were originally submitted.

From Thomas Lundén in Stockholm

Sweden has for a long time had a structure of governance different from most other countries. The ministries are small, and their role is to develop and introduce legislation. Linked to each ministry are several state agencies whose responsibility is to implement the legislation with, in theory if not always in practice, a strict boundary between ministry and agency. As stated on its web page, “The Public Health Agency of Sweden has a national responsibility for public health issues and works to ensure good public health. The agency also works to ensure that the population is protected against communicable diseases and other health threats.”

Government ministers are often accused of ministerstyre – that is, intervening in the agencies’ duties, with journalists often instigating them to do just that. In the COVID-19 case, the measures have been taken by the Public Health Agency with the State Epidemiologist as spokesperson. If and when the agency (like others) finds it necessary to involve the legislature, it can do so, and this has happened recently since some laws had to be changed. So far, Swedish policy has effectively been set by the medical experts, with the government voicing support for the measures taken. These measures include distance education for

Swedish authorities may be right, but this seems doubtful. Second-wave fatalities in other countries are likely to be better kept in check since there will have been much more testing and contact tracing by then. – Henry Milner
upper-level institutions, with schools for those under 15 remaining open so that parents can work and kids are kept off the streets; a ban on visiting care homes for the elderly; and rules requiring cafés, bars and restaurants to offer table service only and limit crowding by spacing out tables. All meetings involving more than 49 people are banned, with people gathering advised to leave an empty chair between participants.

In addition, the Public Health Agency has put in place a set of recommendations for individuals that are supposed to be followed, although they aren’t being legally enforced. These include that people work from home if able to do so, keep a distance from other people in public spaces, and stay at home if sick. Clearly, Swedes reduced their mobility substantially, even without police enforcement. Cell phone data show that the inhabitants of Stockholm reduced their trips to the most popular Swedish holiday destinations during Easter by around 90 per cent.

There are some alarming signs: in the Stockholm area, several homes for the aged have been hit by the infection, in spite of seemingly rigid measures. Forty-two per cent of deaths took place in nursing homes for the elderly – deaths that in many countries and some U.S. states would not appear in the data. Moreover, concentrated among the victims were elderly Somali immigrants who, though information was soon provided in most of the immigrant languages, are both difficult to reach and, unlike native Swedes, tend to live together multigenerationally. And immigrants are overrepresented among nursing home workers.

In my opinion, it is a mistake to link the unacceptably large number of deaths in Sweden to our policy vis-à-vis COVID-19. It rather reflects a deficiency in the treatment of people who are very old and/or have multiple pathologies, in institutions or at home. Their medical, social and nutritional needs have to be met by far too large a number of individuals, many of whom work part-time, are not eligible for paid sick leave, and are immigrants with a lower knowledge of Swedish language and culture. If a home for the aged is served by 50 different people, one who is infected and not protected may be enough to cause deaths.

At this point we cannot say that the “Swedish model” of relative openness under strict recommendations has not been successful: the number of infected people without serious illness has grown, hopefully reaching a level of stability and immunity, while the hospital

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side has been able to cope without using the emergency hospitals provided by the military. Where failure lies is in the integration of a large immigrant population, both service providers and receivers. This is bad enough.

One final point. To understand the Swedish approach, we should note that we are sensitive to the dangers of overly rigid measures leading to a reduction of trust in public institutions and, as we can see in Hungary and Poland, rulers potentially taking advantage of this situation to impose dictatorial rule. History may also be a factor. An insight here was provided in a newspaper column on April 6 by Uppsala political science professor emeritus Leif Lewin, replying to articles critical of the Swedish position as a manifestation of its being “peace-damaged” (i.e. naive and not understanding the gravity of the situation) as a result of having stayed outside of wars. Lewin’s article was entitled “No, it’s the others who are war-damaged.” He responded that Sweden’s neutrality during World War II entailed hardships which, in meeting them, gave rise to a consensus involving almost all parts of society. It is the other Nordic countries, he argued, where the wars and occupations during the war left scars that make solutions based on consensus less effective.

From Donald Lavery in Stockholm

The Swedish government has followed the recommendations of the Public Health Authority (PHA) concerning restrictions very closely. The Minister of Social Affairs recently commented that the government has carefully deliberated each measure it has taken and has judged the recommendations of its experts on their own merits, in effect responding to critics’ dissatisfaction with what they see as the government simply rubber-stamping what the authorities recommend. Generally speaking, there has been practically no political debate about the restrictions that have been introduced on the advice of the health authorities. The three right-of-centre parties as well as the Left Party have chimed in on this. On the other hand, the government has been criticized for the measures it has taken to keep the economy going.

The dry, matter-of-fact approach of Anders Tegnell, the head epidemiologist at the PHA, has endeared him to the Swedish people. In the polls measuring popular trust in various institutions, the PHA has had a high ranking. Tegnell’s approach was echoed by Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, who was quoted as saying, “We are going to number the dead in the thousands. We might just as well get used to the fact.” According to Tegnell, the PHA
does not focus on providing prognoses for the number of dead: “That is not what we consider to be most important; it is more important that health services get figures about how many people need intensive care and the like. We have been using models the whole time to do this. The number of deaths depends on so many different things that all such figures are very, very difficult both to calculate and to interpret.”

In the early period at least, the ability to test whether people have been infected with the virus has been inadequate in Sweden. The PHA has had to establish priorities with an eye to keeping health services running. In this regard Iceland stands out among the Nordic countries. Home to one of the world’s leading biochemical firms, and with a population of only 360,000 people, Iceland has set up a testing regime that has reached a much larger proportion of the country than anywhere else, making it available for free for anyone who wants it.

The Swedish position was defended in the main Stockholm Daily Dagens Nyheter in an interview with Johan Carlson, head of PHA. Here are some excerpts I have translated.

*I try to tell politicians how important it is that measures are accepted by the*
population. That way people are more likely to follow them ... There is no law that parents must have their children vaccinated. There is no law to prevent doctors from prescribing too many antibiotics. Nevertheless, [these measures] work better [in Sweden] than in many other places ...

In the Nordic countries my colleagues ... and I have been very much in agreement ... [but they] have had a different impact on policy ... The Danish authority for the prevention of infectious disease made a public statement to disassociate itself from the business of closing the border, which is meaningless in the struggle against the epidemic.

The key is not the number of people who die from the coronavirus. The key is what we see after four or five years. What effect will the outbreak of the coronavirus have on the health situation in Sweden on the whole? Each year 850,000 people are hospitalized – we must take care of all the other ailments as well. To what extent will corona push these aside? ... And how will the psychic health of children be affected? That is one of the reasons we are against closing the schools. Many children live in broken homes, under difficult social conditions. School is their lifeline ...

Many countries have an authority that is solely responsible for the prevention of infectious diseases. We have an agency with a wider mandate that includes both prevention of infectious diseases and public health. We have it built into us to ponder this balance, to see the whole picture. I think that this is a great advantage. We are forced to lift our gaze.

In views expressed in an interview on April 22 in Svenska Dagbladet, Frode Forland, the director for the prevention of infectious diseases at Norway’s Public Health Institute, the closest equivalent to Sweden’s PHA, suggests that in taking charge early of measures to check the novel coronavirus, Norwegian politicians adopted a rhetoric – Prime Minister Erna Solberg talked about “beating down the infection” (“slå ner smittan”) – which the experts maintain is unrealistic. Forde’s comment recalls the quote from Johan Carlsson that he and his colleagues in the other Nordic countries differ not on content but in their impact on policy.

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We should not assume that Swedish political leaders underestimate the severity of the challenge. As the Prime Minister put it on April 22, “The road ahead is long, and it will
be rather a question of months than of weeks before the crisis is over.” Unlike in the United States, understandably, the coronavirus crisis seems to have provided an opportunity to take and bring the Swedish nation together. On the economy, the government has proposed a system of temporary support to employers and self-employed workers to continue employment during short-term layoffs. It has been made easier to qualify for unemployment insurance, which is restructured to provide greater financial security. More funding is proposed for the Swedish public employment service to allow more people to participate in employment training and other programs improving labour market access and ensure equivalent service levels throughout the country. More spaces are being provided at universities and other institutions of higher and vocational adult education.

Prime Minister Löfven even replaced the party pin on his lapel with a Swedish flag during his regular press conferences. The result was a record-breaking increase of 6.8 percentage points in the SvD/SIFO poll for his Social Democrats, up to 30.6 per cent. According to SIFO, because of the outbreak of the coronavirus the political debate has been completely dominated by the issues of the economy, unemployment and health care. That development particularly favoured the Social Democrats, who gained voters from almost all the other parties as well as among abstainers. The populist Swedish Democrats are 11 percentage points behind, tied with the Conservatives for second place.

To take the necessary measures, the government has had to negotiate with the other parties to pass a bill that gave it the needed powers to limit restaurant and public transit use and the like, and such measures must nonetheless be presented within two days to the parliament, which can rescind them. Unlike in the case of Finland, the Swedish constitution does not have a provision to allow the government to take emergency measures in times of peace. Finland, with its terrible war experience, kept such a clause, which the government applied in no uncertain terms. In addition, while Sweden disbanded its civil defence after the Cold War and sold off the stockpiles of medical supplies and food it had maintained since World War II for emergencies, Finland assessed the risks differently and kept its stockpiles, finding itself now in the enviable position of having adequate supplies of protective clothing for medical workers.

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From Jan Otto Andersson in Turku/Åbo, Finland

Despite its affinities with Sweden, Finland more closely followed Norway, Denmark and Germany. Nurseries, schools and universities were closed, and students had to follow distance education. However, young children of parents engaged in necessary work were allowed daycare and education as they would be normally. Groups were limited to 10, with working from home becoming the rule. Restaurants were only allowed to offer takeout food. The metropolitan region of greater Helsinki (Uusimaa/Nyland) was isolated for 19 days. Cases outside the region are still few. Skiing resorts were closed, and all who arrive from abroad – even Sweden – are quarantined for two weeks. People over 70, or with respiratory diseases, are urged to stay at home, but also, if possible, to go outside for a walk. Shops remain open, but sales have been considerably reduced, and the streets are rather empty. Nature walking tours have increased perceptibly, and mass migration to summer cottages has raised critical comments. Restrictions will be gradually reduced by mid-May, but all big summer festivals will be cancelled.

Finland has a ministry of social affairs and health and a public research organization, THL, which has been consulted by the government on all restrictive measures. Cuts by earlier governments have reduced the reliability of THL’s assessments of the ongoing situation, which have been the subject of some criticism.

Gallup polls showed 70 per cent of Finns think that the restrictions are the right ones, with 84 per cent satisfied with Prime Minister Sanna Marin, who heads a centre-red-green coalition government. As in Sweden, her Social Democrats have benefited at the expense of the populists, known in Finland as the True Finns. But there is an economic price to pay. The Finance Minister calculates that Finland must take up to €20 billion extra in loans this year, with state indebtedness expected to rise from 60 to 80 per cent of GDP. Like other countries, Finland has started to give support to firms and individuals hurt by the
restrictions and not covered by the general welfare system. Services, especially hotels and restaurants, along with cultural workers, are the most affected. The trade union federations and employer organizations agreed to make temporary layoffs easier and to relax conditions for unemployment benefits.

Finland is constrained because of its slow recovery from the financial and euro crisis. Unlike the other Nordics, it adopted the euro from the start. (Denmark linked its krona to the euro, but is not a member of the eurozone; Sweden kept its monetary independence and was able to steer clear of the euro crisis; Norway, not a member of the EU, can use the revenue from its oil industries as an economic stabilizer.) Moreover, among European countries, Finland was the most affected by the sanctions directed towards Russia.

Finally, Finnish exports are dependent on machinery and other investment goods as well as shipbuilding, both badly hurt by the economic depression. The building of luxury cruise ships could be affected as the companies have been shaken by COVID-19 incidence on board. The shipyard in my hometown of Turku has orders for eight ships until 2025. The 20,000 employees continue to work on these orders – but for how long?

From John Erik Fossum in Oslo, writing about developments in Denmark as well as Norway

In Norway, the government seems to have gone further in the lockdown than what the experts advised. This is in part simply because the economic repercussions were not as great, the government in Norway having more financial leverage as a result of the massive petroleum fund. That is not the entire story.
though, because it does not explain the fact that Denmark preceded it into serious lockdown. Indeed, part of the story is simply that Norwegian politicians copied Danish policies.

Differences in political culture help us understand the contrast between Denmark and Norway on one side, and Sweden on the other. Both Denmark and Norway are generally speaking more nationalist than Sweden, which has traditionally been more internationalist and open to foreign influences. Hence, other things being equal, it is easier to get cross-partisan agreement for a lockdown in Denmark and Norway than in Sweden.

Very extensive support measures were put in place to deal with the effects of the shutdown, though in Norway the emergency legislation instituted as required in the constitution was quite different from what the Solberg government initially proposed. Alert law professors first drew attention to the hasty, secret deliberations between the government and leaders of the opposition to forge the new legislation, as well as the danger of giving the government extremely wide powers, which sidelined parliament’s legislative role. Evidently, the professors won the attention of the opposition, who scaled down the government’s emergency powers considerably, forcing the government to go back to parliament to have the legislation extended on a monthly basis.

To a large extent, like Finland and unlike Sweden, Norway and Denmark locked things down, preventing the virus from spreading by minimizing contact. Fearing that a rapid spread of the virus would overburden the public health system, lockdown was instituted to ensure that the public health system could deal with the infection over time. This strategy is highly interventionist in people’s lives and typically requires invoking a set of exceptional measures available only in emergency situations during which governments are granted special authorization.

The Swedish strategy has also been to prevent the virus from spreading so quickly that the health system breaks down under the burden, but it differs from the other Nordic countries in the means used to achieve that goal. It combines recommendations to the general public and regulations affecting those prone to (spreading) infection, but all placed in the context of the broader socioeconomic and psychological effects of a period of lengthy shutdown. It is not the same as what we saw in Britain and still see in Brazil, Mexico, parts of the United States and, inconsistently, from Donald Trump – that is, downplaying the
Sweden’s refusal to go further in locking down the economy may be due to its being more attentive to economic expertise than the others. Such expertise is typically less supportive of state intervention and more sensitive to international openness. – John Erik Fossum

hazards and the need for a coherent, science-based and publicly orchestrated and conducted response, and instead leaving responsibility to local and regional authorities.

Finland, Denmark and Norway on one side, and Sweden on the other, produced a comprehensive public response anchored in expert knowledge. This was most visible in Sweden, though not all Swedish epidemiologists agreed with the position of chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell. Sweden’s refusal to go further in locking down the economy may be due to its being more attentive to economic expertise than the others. Such expertise is typically less supportive of state intervention and more sensitive to international openness, though in Norway at least, many economists take a different stance, for instance opposing membership in what they consider to be a too neoliberal European Union.

The main concrete difference between the two strategies is in the invocation of emergency powers. Denmark was first to introduce such legislation (adopted by a unanimous Folketing on March 12, 2020, and due to expire on March 1, 2021). It allowed the minister of health and elderly affairs to require persons assumed to be infected to isolate themselves, and authorized the government to prohibit large gatherings of people and block access to means of transportation. The legislation also provided the authorities with increased tracking options, including rules obliging people to provide information. On March 14, Denmark closed its borders and shut down kindergartens and schools. One month later, Denmark, like Germany, Austria and Switzerland, relaxed lockdown rules. It allowed daycare centres and elementary schools to open, followed by hairdressers, beauticians, dentists and opticians, who are required to sanitize the work area between clients.

Norway basically followed Denmark’s approach, introducing emergency legislation on March 18. Nevertheless, there was more controversy surrounding the Norwegian version and the legislation that was adopted was less comprehensive, with the timeframe shortened from six months to one month. As I write, the government wants to extend the legislation. While some opposition parties have voiced reservations, it is likely that it will be renewed.

A measure specific to Norway, with its large northern hinterland, was a prohibition on persons seeking to stay in their vacation homes when these were located outside the municipality where they lived. This measure was urged on the government by municipalities
where these are more numerous than permanent homes and where it was feared that the limited medical capacity could not deal with a large influx of infected people.

Both Denmark and Norway introduced wage compensation to allow people to keep their jobs during the lockdown. The Danish arrangement is slated to expire on June 9. Both the Danish and Norwegian governments introduced measures to compensate businesses for income losses. In these measures, we see clear elements of the Nordic model: tripartite cooperation between government and organizations of large employers and employees. Significant resources were channelled into the economy as well as the health sector, and both Denmark and Norway have shown a clear commitment to sheltering people from fallout from the measures.

In this they rely on a key feature of the Nordic model: trust. The Swedish strategy is primarily one of the government trusting the citizens to follow its recommendations. For their part, Norway and Denmark’s social distancing and lockdown strategy called on high levels of trust and sense of community and belonging. Public communications included reassurances from the government that it trusts the population to put up with the lockdown for the greater good. The Norwegian statements sought to couch this paternalism in positive terms: Prime Minister Solberg labelled the fight against the virus a collective “dugnad.” This is a word used to depict “voluntary” work that housing and other cooperatives organize to address community needs. Clearly, this has been working. In a recent poll, 77 per cent declared that they supported the government’s handling of the coronavirus. The main governing party, Solberg’s conservative party (Høyre), saw a dramatic rise in support between mid-March and mid-April (up from 17.9 to 25.2 per cent).

Even if we operate with two different coronavirus response models, we should not overstate Sweden’s differences from Norway and Denmark. Norway stands in between Denmark and Sweden historically, in that it was ruled by Denmark from 1389 to 1814 and by Sweden from 1814 to 1905. There have been no internecine wars in the Nordic region since 1815, and the three Scandinavian countries’ languages are fully mutually understandable. Language is therefore also a factor explaining why the Danish and Norwegian responses are so similar, and why emulation happens so frequently. In this case Norway copied from Denmark, whereas in the postwar period it constantly looked to Sweden as the model welfare state.

Postscript from Henry Milner

As I write, Denmark and Norway have joined Austria, Switzerland and Germany, among others, in beginning to end the lockdown, with shops and schools reopening. Norway is set to return to normal by summer. Sweden is sticking to its guns but, as in Quebec, cases continue to emerge. When it comes to the pandemic, so far, Denmark, Norway and Finland are the countries that can legitimately lay claim to constituting the Nordic model.
The perils of postcolonialism

The Coastal GasLink Pipeline and resource management in the age of reconciliation

By Gareth Morley

Gareth Morley is a lawyer with the British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General. This article is written entirely in his personal capacity and is in no way intended to represent the views of the government of British Columbia. The author represented the B.C. government in a hearing as to whether the Coastal Gas Pipeline is within federal or provincial jurisdiction, but has no involvement in advising or representing the British Columbia government in relation to the issues referred to in the article.

China’s report to the World Health Organization on December 31, 2019, of a “pneumonia of unknown cause” in Wuhan – what we now know will be one of the pivotal events of the 21st century – at the time drew hardly any attention. Indeed, right up into March, politically engaged Canadians were deeply divided over another issue: the construction of the Coastal Gas Pipeline through the traditional territory of the Wet’suwet’en people – with the approval of the Wet’suwet’en’s elected chiefs and councils, but against the will of those claiming to represent their traditional governance structures. While the pandemic blew this (along with every other issue) out of the news cycle, it remains unresolved, is likely to flare up again and points to broader issues Canadian society will have to live with for the foreseeable future.

Coincidentally, this controversy was sparked by another relatively little remarked event that occurred while Canadians were preparing to celebrate the New Year. On December 31, 2019, Justice Marguerite Church of the British Columbia Supreme Court granted the company building the Coastal GasLink Pipeline an injunction against protesters blockading a bridge on the Morice West Forest Service Road, near Smithers, B.C.
The protesters said they were there to prevent people from accessing the territory of the “Unist’ot’en” without the consent of their traditional chiefs. The judge described the Unisto’ot’en as a matrilineal group of houses within the Gil_seyhu (Frog) Clan of the Wet’suwet’en. However, the most direct connection appears to be with Dark House, which has kept organizationally independent from the Office of the Wet’suwet’en representing the hereditary chiefs, but shares their opposition to the Coastal GasLink Pipeline traversing traditional Wet’suwet’en territory.

When the RCMP moved in to enforce the injunction in February, solidarity protests occurred across the country – most notably, Mohawk protesters blocked Canada’s rail arteries in Ontario and Quebec, making what had been a provincial story a truly national one.

The controversy raised deep issues dividing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canada: about what postcolonial reconciliation would look like, or whether it is even possible; about the relationship between democratic elections and representation; and about the future of the fossil fuel economy. Underlying all of these is the meta-issue of whether it is possible to think about these issues in a nuanced way in an era of polarization and social media.
The media largely moved on in March: first, hereditary chiefs agreed to a protocol with the federal and provincial governments about continuing rights and title discussions, and then North America finally started taking COVID-19 seriously. But the issues on the ground – and, of course, the more fundamental ones – have not been resolved. On May 1, elected chiefs objected to the process on the basis it would occur entirely within the hereditary system and the issues of the actual Coastal GasLink route are not part of it.

The dream of LNG

The Coastal Gas Pipeline project involves building a link between the vast natural gas reserves of northeastern British Columbia and a liquefaction facility near Kitimat on the Pacific coast. B.C.’s provincial government has long supported the goal of one or more major liquefied natural gas (“LNG”) facilities in the north, especially as the long-run prospects for North American natural gas prices plummeted in the wake of the massive increase in supply as a result of the shale revolution. Though world prices were also very low, even before the COVID-19 shock, proponents hope this is temporary.

Support is bipartisan: the B.C. Liberals pulled off an unexpected victory in the 2011 provincial election after a campaign focused on the benefits of LNG, and the current NDP government of John Horgan has also supported its development. Horgan’s government depends on its alliance with the anti-LNG B.C. Green Party for “confidence and supply,” but the Greens ultimately decided not to make LNG an issue on which they would bring the government down. While they have opposed all legislation to enable LNG, it can easily pass with the votes of the NDP and the Liberals.

The relationship between LNG and climate politics is contentious. Proponents argue that for the foreseeable future, exports of LNG will have the effect of displacing coal as a source of dispatchable electricity generation: while burning methane (the main component of “natural gas”) creates carbon dioxide, it is more efficient than coal (or oil, for that matter) and is vastly less toxic in its effect on
ambient air quality. LNG proponents therefore argue that this is fossil fuel infrastructure that will benefit the environment, especially since British Columbia can use its abundant hydro-electricity to provide zero-carbon electricity for the liquefaction process.

On the other hand, if methane escapes without being burned, it has a far greater warming effect than carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas caused by combustion. The question of whether natural gas development is good or bad for the climate therefore depends on the degree of escape and the extent to which this can be reduced. Recent empirical work suggests that the release of methane into the atmosphere has been severely undercounted.\(^1\)

Pragmatic cost-benefit arguments along these lines may seem irrelevant to those who see a deeper energy transition as a moral imperative, one that can only be fulfilled by ceasing to build any more infrastructure for extracting and transporting fossil fuels. Getting the planet to “net zero” carbon emissions by the middle of this century is not compatible with using natural gas, or any other fossil fuel, to generate electricity or heat homes – at least in the absence of significant developments in carbon capture technology.

Getting the planet to “net zero” carbon emissions by the middle of this century is not compatible with using natural gas, or any other fossil fuel, to generate electricity or heat homes – at least in the absence of significant developments in carbon capture technology.

Critically, the British Columbians hoping for these benefits include a large proportion of the Indigenous people living in the north. The Kitimat facility is to a very large degree the product of efforts by leaders of the Haisla Nation, where it will be located. Among these leaders is Ellis Ross, the B.C. Liberal MLA for Skeena and a particularly lacerating critic of opponents of the pipeline. As with other major pipelines, Indigenous opinion is divided. Canadians quickly became aware that the elected chiefs representing First Nations along the line of the Coastal Gas Pipeline had agreed to “community benefit agreements,” but that hereditary chiefs of the Wet’suwet’en, in particular, had not.
The dream of reconciliation

The dream of a resource boom is the oldest one of settler British Columbia. The first resource boom – the marine fur trade – was a joint enterprise of Indigenous and European peoples, but it brought species loss and epidemics. Later booms – the gold rush, the coal rush, the timber rush, the hydro rush, the real estate rush – were pure manifestations of colonial state capitalism, with some succeeding on their own terms while others worked only for those who got out early.

In British Columbia, settlers and their government essentially appropriated land and resources without any attempt at reaching agreement with the Indigenous people living there. The only exceptions were a few mid-19th century Vancouver Island treaties with the Hudson’s Bay Company as agent of the Crown, and the extension of Treaty 8 from Alberta into the part of northern British Columbia east of the Rockies – where the natural gas deposits are.

Throughout the 20th century, the British Columbia government took the view that the land and its resources simply belonged to the province: if any aboriginal rights ever existed, they were “extinguished” long ago. It persisted in this view after section 35, affirming “existing aboriginal and treaty rights,” was added to the Canadian constitution in 1982. The B.C. government of Premier Bill Bennett signed on to that amendment claiming that it would have no effect west of the Rockies, since there were no treaties and, outside of reserves and food fishing, no aboriginal rights continued to “exist.” This continued to be the provincial government’s position for another decade.

It was the hereditary chiefs of the Wet’suwet’en, along with their Gitksan relatives, who brought the landmark litigation that challenged the B.C. government’s historical approach, bringing a vast amount of information about their traditional governance structures onto the public record. In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada’s rendered the Delgamuukw decision, making it clear that aboriginal people in British Columbia continued to have legal rights to the land that governments and resource companies could not simply ignore. It was often claimed during the social media free-for-all surrounding these events that the decision vindicated the position of the hereditary chiefs. The truth is more complicated – and the unfinished business of that case is the necessary backdrop for what happened in the winter of 2020.

The Wet’suwet’en have a completely distinct language from their neighbours, but developed an interlocking matrilineal kinship/governance structure with them. Larger clans are subdivided into smaller houses. Although the system is called “hereditary,” it is not based
on principles similar to European feudalism such as primogeniture: an individual becomes a chief of a house by being selected to carry on the name of the chief of that house: the process has sometimes been contested, but is ideally based on consensus attained at a feast – potlatch in the trade pidgin Chinook.

In addition to these traditional kinship/governance structures, there is a system of elected chiefs and councils, first created by the federal Indian Act. Enrolled members of Indian bands – now usually called First Nations – can periodically vote for a chief and band council. While no one denies that the origin of this system was colonial, these structures clearly now gain their legitimacy the same way that other elected governments do – on the basis of their mandate and the fact that they can be replaced if those they represent collectively decide to do so.

Opinions among politically active Indigenous people differ on the weight each of these structures should have in a postcolonial world: the moderate view that both traditional and elected structures should have a role is found in a number of modern treaties, but there are “traditionalists” who reject the elected system altogether or say its authority should be limited to the reserves, while there are others who feel that the traditional system should be limited to ritual and persuasive roles.

The Delgamuukw case was originally brought as a claim for “jurisdiction” and “ownership” by the hereditary chiefs of the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en houses. The lands claimed by each house had been delineated, in the case of the Wet’suwet’en, at a 1986 feast where the entire claim area was divided into 133 territories assigned to 71 houses. Essentially, each house chief claimed to have a form of both sovereignty and property ownership over the specified territory, to be held in accordance with Wet’suwet’en law. For better or for worse, the Supreme Court of Canada did not accept that proposition. Instead, it set out, at length, its own concept of “aboriginal title” and how this could be proved. On the grounds that the evidence in the case had not been aimed at this (newly formulated) concept, the Supreme Court said there would have to be a new trial. That new trial never took place.

The difference between what the claimants in Delgamuukw were originally seeking and the “aboriginal title” that the Supreme Court ultimately described has been referred to as a “technicality” – but it is at the root of issues that remain with us two decades later. The Supreme Court made it clear that, in its view, aboriginal title had to be asserted at the nation
The difference between what the claimants in *Delgamuukw* were originally seeking and the “aboriginal title” that the Supreme Court ultimately described has been referred to as a “technicality” – but it is at the root of issues that remain with us two decades later.

level (i.e., by the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en as a whole) and not at the level of a house. Decisions about how lands subject to aboriginal title will be used must be made “by the community.” Aboriginal title was also not held to be absolute; rather, it is subject to justifiable “infringements” by the federal or provincial governments, although those infringements have to meet a strict test in court.

### Putting postcolonialism into practice

A number of practical issues arose out of the *Delgamuukw* decision. The most pressing was how resource decisions would be made while the extremely complex process of proving aboriginal title took place. The general answer to this came in the 2004 *Haida* decision – and it is really that decision that created the operative framework applied ever since. In *Haida*, the Supreme Court established a flexible doctrine of a “duty to consult” and, in some cases, accommodate, Indigenous entities with potential claims for aboriginal title (or for rights that do not go quite as far as title). On the one hand, this is “not a veto”; on the other hand, it means that any resource project to which there are objections by groups plausibly having aboriginal rights or title claims is potentially subject to legal challenge.

Different stakeholders would undoubtedly have different accounts of how well and how justly the system of resource and land development that resulted from *Haida* has worked. It is a complex area of law, resistant to simplistic summary – and certainly subject to reasonable criticism from all sides. But what may not have been appreciated in the national and global media conversation is that this system is definitely not the same as the unilateral authority of provincial resource ministries that prevailed in the last century.

This works both ways. Development requires the involvement of Indigenous peoples, but decisions *not* to develop can be challenged as well. Since Indigenous people face the same cross-cutting considerations of economic and environmental priorities and values as everyone else, the implications are complicated. In practice, the duty to consult has led to a resource industry that can only operate through often-complex agreements providing employment opportunities and funding of public services for Indigenous groups.

The classic legal question of how to address the “holdout” of one property owner who says no to a linear project whose value depends on going through everyone’s land arises in this new, hopefully postcolonial, context. If
one community holding a claim to aboriginal rights or title says “no” to a project that is located solely in their land, they say no for themselves. But if they say “no” to a project that traverses multiple territories, then the “no” is for everybody. While this may sound appealing to opponents of fossil fuel infrastructure, the same would be true of transmission lines connecting zero-carbon run-of-the-river or wind farms to the electricity grid.

The difficult question is how to balance the right to consent to development with the right not to consent. Because the “duty to consult” is “not a veto,” this problem can be resolved—albeit not speedily and not without potentially alienating dissenters—by the courts deciding that the objectors were consulted sufficiently. But to that extent, “free, prior and informed consent” becomes an aspiration rather than a legal prerequisite.

The other problem Delgamuukw left unresolved was how to determine the will of each individual community. The Supreme Court stated that land use decisions were collective, not individual, but avoided the classic political theory problem raised: how does a community decide when its members disagree? The post-colonial dilemma posed by this problem arises because outsiders do not have the legitimacy to resolve disputes over the right system of governance, but cannot avoid having to deal with some governance structure.

Justice David Vickers struggled with this issue in his decision in the only other major title case to come to trial in British Columbia. Brought by the elected chief and council of the Xeni’Gwetin First Nation (formerly the Nehemiah Valley Indian Band) on behalf of a Tsilhqot’in Nation (which, in his decision, Judge Vickers identified as a cultural nation like “French Canadians”) that had no definitive organizational or political existence. The elected government, as a political entity, could, depending on the social facts, exercise some of the rights of this prepolitical people. (The difficulties of a judiciary whose own authority necessarily comes from the “colonial settler state” determining as a “question of fact” the political representatives of an ethnos is perhaps an unavoidable paradox of postcolonialism in this context.) The Supreme Court adopted Justice Vickers’s approach without the same visible struggle and without necessarily giving guidance to how it might be approached in other contexts with different “social facts.”

One of the implications of the “duty to consult” regime is that such governance questions can, to some degree, be avoided. It is not absolutely necessary for a non-Indigenous government to determine these questions, so long as title is unsettled—it may be legally obliged to consult with both elected and traditional governance structures, and if there are differences of view, it can try to persuade a court that it did its best. But the precondition for consulting with everyone is that there be no specific entity that has a clear right to give or withhold “free, prior and informed consent”: the “settler” government must listen, but ultimately, and subject to review by the colonial courts for how reasonably it has done so, it decides whom to heed.

In 2020, these contradictions manifested themselves on the streets and in social media comment threads. The Wet’suwet’en are divided as to whether a pipeline through their
traditional territories is in their collective interest. Both traditional and elected structures have ways of resolving, but also asserting, these differences. Inevitably, opposing forces within the “settler” population were drawn on the side of different “authentic” representatives of the Wet’suwet’en depending on their own attitudes to natural gas development. The same, of course, can be said about Indigenous communities across the country: they too saw the quarrel in terms of their own disputes about governance and development.

A right to develop and a right to control development cannot both be truly absolute without coming into conflict. Depending on who is entitled to exercise the rights of the Wet’suwet’en, the Haisla may be able to exercise their right to develop only if not every group along the route has to fully and freely consent. If development does not happen, that also has implications for the interests of those upstream and downstream. These are the longstanding problems of pluralism and federalism – postcolonialism may mean that Indigenous people are brought into such problems as full partners, but it cannot mean that these problems will not exist.

Construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline continues, as (over Zoom) do discussions between Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs and both levels of government about aboriginal title – as I write, the elected chiefs have objected to being frozen out of that process. The bottom has fallen out of energy markets – no one knows what will happen to them once the COVID pandemic ends.

Disputes about governance will, of course, always be with us as long as human beings disagree and have conflicting identities. These disputes become more complex once new voices are in the mix – but the simplicity of the colonial diktat is the peace of the grave and we should not be nostalgic for it.

A long, but neglected, strand in the Western tradition emphasized that the best regime is a mixed regime: neither democracy nor tradition should rule without the other. Finding the right mix for a particular culture is a problem that outsiders cannot solve. Nor has any culture definitely solved the problems of how different polities can compromise over matters that affect them all – and outsiders do need to be part of that one. Virtues of patience and practical wisdom are needed – something that traditional cultures (Western or Indigenous), for all their faults and all their differences, would see immediately. As a consequence, they would also see why the flattening democratic populism of social media will not make things better.

Notes


2 These English anthropological terms have become standard and are convenient since multiple language groups have similar and interlocking kinship/governance structures. The Wet’suwet’en terms are pdeek for clan and yax for house; see Antonia Mills, Eagle Down Is Our Law (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994).
What makes the Prairie provinces different?

An introduction by Bob Chodos

A prominent feature of the outcome of last October’s federal election was regional polarization. In Saskatchewan and Alberta, two thirds of voters supported the Conservatives, giving them 98 per cent (47 out of 48) seats in those two provinces, while in the rest of the country the Conservatives won barely a quarter of the seats. In this issue, Inroads takes a deeper look at some of the aspects of this regional difference. Geoff Salomons and Daniel Béland explore one of the most striking aspects of Alberta’s distinct political culture: its ongoing rejection of a sales tax, which every other province and the federal government have implemented. Stephen Bird draws on survey data collected by the Positive Energy Project at the University of Ottawa, with which he is affiliated, to determine the extent of regional polarization on issues of energy and the environment. He concludes that different regional attitudes, based as they are in differences of geography and infrastructure, are likely to persist – as, indeed, is Alberta’s unique attitude toward a sales tax, despite strong economic arguments in favour of such a tax.
Is the Alberta Advantage really an advantage?

A short history of Alberta’s refusal even to consider a sales tax

By Geoff Salomons and Daniel Béland

As the only province in the country without a sales tax, Alberta is an anomaly in the Canadian federation. Both citizens and governments have celebrated this peculiarity as a central component of Alberta’s identity: the Alberta Advantage. Alberta’s oil wealth is certainly a significant contributing factor to its failure to implement a sales tax, but it is not the whole explanation.

Alberta has faced numerous opportunities where the adoption of a sales tax would have been a sound policy decision. A sales tax minimizes tax distortions in the economy, is preferable to the taxation of things we want more of (such as income) and, especially in Alberta’s case, is vastly superior to relying on volatile resource revenue. Nevertheless, provincial leadership has actively resisted such a policy choice and continually worked to entrench the lack of a sales tax within Alberta’s broader identity and political culture.

Alberta did adopt a sales tax back in 1936. At the time, Alberta’s finances were in poor condition. With the Great Depression and drought affecting Alberta’s primary industry, agriculture, deficits were increasing and debt was accumulating. A marginal sales tax of 2 per cent was adopted to help stem the bleeding. The tax brought in millions of dollars in additional government revenue; however, significant pushback led to its repeal a year and a half later.

Geoff Salomons is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Alberta in Edmonton studying the long-term challenges of nonrenewable resource wealth governance in Alberta. He also works full-time for the federal government as he completes his studies.

Daniel Béland is Professor of Political Science at McGill University in Montreal and Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada.
Fast forward to the early 1970s and we see the emergence of the Alberta Advantage narrative, although it would not be called that until the early 1990s. The 1973 oil shock dramatically increased the price of oil and, along with it, Alberta’s resource revenue. While Alberta’s public finances had been much healthier since the discovery of the Leduc oil field in 1947, the first oil shock dramatically altered expectations about the lucrative nature of this industry for government. Peter Lougheed’s Progressive Conservative administration responded by cutting taxes, increasing spending and – unable to spend all the windfall revenue that was pouring in – establishing a provincial savings fund (the Alberta Heritage Savings and Trust Fund) to set aside some of the excess revenue for a future date.

As Alberta Provincial Treasurer Gordon Miniely said in the legislature on February 7, 1975, “After allowing for the substantial tax reductions and new expenditure programs contained in this Budget, I estimate that $1.5 billion will be available by December 31, 1975, for transfer to an Alberta heritage trust fund for present and future Albertans.” While Lougheed is often praised for his farsightedness in establishing the fund, the government was literally in a position where it could not spend tax revenues fast enough. What is less well known is that by simultaneously cutting taxes and increasing spending and using resource revenue to plug that gap, Lougheed planted the seeds of what would later become known as the Alberta Advantage.

When oil prices dropped less than a decade later, the Heritage Fund was the provincial government’s first target. In 1983, it began withdrawing 100 per cent of the annual returns, while simultaneously reducing the government’s contribution from 30 to 15 per cent. Then, when oil prices utterly collapsed in 1986, resulting in a 20 per cent loss of revenue, the government ceased all contributions to the Heritage Fund. The Progressive Conservative government, now under Lougheed’s successor Don Getty, patted itself on the back for its foresight in establishing the Heritage Fund,
misleadingly arguing that this was exactly why the fund had been created.

Under Premier Getty, the Alberta government held spending constant and had the lowest spending growth in the country. Regardless, continued deficits added to a growing level of debt. The plan to hold spending and allow the economy and revenues to recover was a prudent one and worked well until another recession hit the province in 1991, which caused the deficit to grow dramatically. This pushed the public’s appetite toward a more aggressive approach to dealing with the growing levels of debt, and Getty retired shortly thereafter.

In 1992, former journalist and Calgary Mayor Ralph Klein, a relative newcomer to the Progressive Conservative Party, succeeded Getty. The 1993 provincial campaign was fought primarily over how best to deal with the large deficit and growing debt. Surprisingly, it was not a battle over spending cuts versus tax increases, but massive spending cuts versus brutal spending cuts. Klein, campaigning largely against his predecessor’s record, defeated the Liberal Party and ushered in a program of spending cuts that soon became known as the “Klein Revolution.”

The ongoing deficits and growing debt offered the government an opportunity to alter the fiscal regime and add some revenue sources, but for reasons of both ideology and political culture (as noted, even the Liberals were unwilling to touch the revenue side) they chose to stick to the spending side of the budget. Klein then doubled down on this particular fiscal regime by rebranding it the “Alberta Advantage.”

As stated in the 1993 Alberta throne speech: “Unlike some others, my government will not try to buy prosperity through higher taxes. Instead, it will build on Alberta’s existing advantage of low taxes and its free enterprise spirit to develop the most competitive economy in North America. The government will strengthen the Alberta Advantage and sell it aggressively around the globe.” Following this ideological logic, between 1993 and 1997 the Klein government cut spending by approximately 20 per cent. With the fortuitous arrival of additional resource revenue, the government also balanced the budget earlier than anticipated.

During Klein’s tenure as premier, two opportunities arose for the Alberta government to reassess its fiscal regime: the 1994 Tax Reform Commission and the 1998 Tax Review Committee. In both cases, the reports did not recommend the introduction of a sales tax, even though all the other provinces had such a tax in operation and the federal government had recently established its own sales tax, the

The 1993 provincial campaign was fought primarily over how best to deal with the large deficit and growing debt. Surprisingly, it was not a battle over spending cuts versus tax increases, but massive spending cuts versus brutal spending cuts.
Goods and Services Tax (GST), which played an instrumental role in improving federal public finances during the mid- to late 1990s.

A year after the 1994 commission tabled its report, the Alberta government went so far as to introduce a bill stipulating that no provincial sales tax could be adopted without a province-wide referendum. In tabling the bill on March 6, 1995, Provincial Treasurer Jim Dinning stated, “I have often said – and I remember saying this – to a number of people across the country that if one looks very closely at the Alberta flag to your left, Mr. Speaker, if one looks very closely at the wheat sheaves and the wheat fields of that flag, if you try to look very closely and turn it on its side, it says: no provincial sales tax.”

Clearly, the lack of a sales tax was increasingly entrenched within Alberta’s political identity, through the idea of the Alberta Advantage, according to which the lack of provincial sales tax is a blessing for the province.

Much more recently, in 2015, the surprise election of the Alberta NDP presented another opportunity to overhaul this fiscal regime in a context of growing provincial deficits triggered by the fall of oil prices the previous year. To address this situation, the NDP made some revenue changes, notably instituting mildly progressive income tax rates in place of the previous 10 per cent flat tax. Yet once again, like the Liberals during the 1993 provincial campaign, a left-of-centre party refused even to consider a sales tax. NDP Premier Rachel Notley only went as far as the 1998 Tax Review Committee, suggesting that the issue might warrant further discussion – “but not right now.”

Despite the persistence of provincial deficits and against the advice of many economists and policy experts, Premier Jason Kenney has not embraced the idea of a provincial sales tax since his United Conservative Party came to power in the spring of 2019. On the contrary, he drew extensively on Alberta Advantage rhetoric to justify a major cut in the provincial tax rate. Although his government’s first budget did introduce an indirect (and hidden) increase in personal income tax through the freezing of tax brackets, his approach to fiscal balance, like Ralph Klein’s more than 25 years ago, is centred on spending cuts rather than on the creation of new revenue sources, including a provincial sales tax.
Jason Kenney’s approach to fiscal balance, like Ralph Klein’s more than 25 years ago, is centred on spending cuts rather than on the creation of new revenue sources, including a provincial sales tax.

The Alberta Advantage rhetoric that Kenney clings to is problematic from a policy standpoint because it makes it even harder for the provincial government to introduce the sales tax the province badly needs to foster fiscal sustainability, balance the budget and reduce its dependence on resource revenues. To make a case for a provincial sales tax, Alberta policy experts need to argue that underutilizing the province’s fiscal capacity, which the government is doing now in the absence of a sales tax, is a long-term fiscal disadvantage that stands in the way of both revenue stability and policy sustainability.

In March 2020, an oil price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia sparked a massive drop in oil prices shortly after Alberta released its budget based on an estimated US$58 per barrel oil price – the actual price on March 30 was US$14.10. Kenney stated that “all options were on the table” to address the growing deficit. Yet when pressed about a provincial sales tax as one possible option, Kenney replied that he could not “imagine a dumber thing to do.”

To be fair, the combined economic pressure of the oil price crash and the COVID-19 crisis present real challenges for the economies of Alberta, Canada and the world. However, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, serious consideration will need to be given to alternative sources of revenue for Alberta. Moreover, as global efforts to mitigate climate change increase, demand for fossil fuels will inevitably peak. This will only increase the fiscal pressure on the province, and a sales tax will be an increasingly likely policy option for alleviating that pressure. The current crisis appears to represent the best policy window to date, and only time will tell whether Alberta is able to adopt a provincial sales tax, or whether the entrenched political culture of the Alberta Advantage will prevail once again.
Energy and Canada’s polarized regions

By Stephen Bird

One of the most important issues in the 2019 election was Canada’s energy future. There was intense debate on issues such as carbon taxes, pipeline siting and the balance between environmental concerns and the economic benefits associated with fossil fuel development. These issues were especially important in western Canada, characterized by strongly differing opinions between the Prairies and British Columbia.

By May 2020, many of these concerns seemed moot given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The international oil and gas industry was collapsing globally as a result of reduced demand, a forthcoming recession and the Saudi-Russia predatory pricing war. With the price of oil falling below US$20/barrel, Canada’s more-expensive-to-produce oil sands sector is facing a perfect storm. Economic pain in the energy sector arising from the pandemic may make the carbon tax even more contentious than it was in 2019.

One cannot expect these divisions to go away any time soon. A primary reason is that public opinion on many energy issues is regionally polarized. Regional polarization of attitudes is greater in Canada than in the United States, the European Union or South America.

Research by the Positive Energy team at the University of Ottawa (including my colleagues Erick Lachapelle, Monica Gattinger and the rest of the research group) demonstrates that energy polarization is significant.
in some areas, fragmented in others and in places not severe. In short, Canada may not be quite as polarized as the media make us out to be. That’s the good news. The bad news is that regional energy profiles are likely to persist. Attitudes across Canadian regions are based on highly differentiated geographies and infrastructure that is very expensive to change.

Alberta has 83 per cent of Canadian oil sands production; Saskatchewan has the vast majority of the country’s uranium production. Both provinces generate half of their electricity from coal, and slightly less from natural gas. By contrast, Ontario’s energy production is dominated by a mix of hydro, nuclear and renewables. Both British Columbia and Quebec derive the vast majority of their electricity from hydro. The Atlantic provinces are a somewhat diverse mix of hydro, wind, coal, nuclear, gas and biomass.

These production systems are strongly tied to regional identity and the jobs that people have, and they reflect long-term economic infrastructure investments that risk becoming stranded assets if those regions pivot and adopt new means of power generation. Underlying interests and attitudes in each of those regions are tied to the occupations and infrastructure that dominate regionally. Common ground is hard to find when one ground has uranium and another has wind turbines, while still others have coal mines and coal-based thermal power plants, or large hydro, or oil sands extraction.

The irony in all of this is that Canada is an energy superpower with one of the world’s highest levels of energy production per capita. Our energy mix is highly diversified (coal, wind, gas, nuclear, biomass, oil, hydro, etc.), and the energy sector has generated high incomes for those who have invested or are employed in it. One might imagine that, in such a situation, Canadians would have roughly similar attitudes on energy policy, but this is not the case.

So, what do we see when we look at Canadian public opinion on energy issues? In the fall of 2019, our team conducted a panel survey of 2,679 Canadians to assess public opinion concerning energy, with five regional subsamples of more than 500 each (B.C., Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, Atlantic Canada). The survey was conducted amid growing polarization over energy and environment policy in the months leading up to the October general election.

The term polarized typically describes public opinion that is strongly divided, with sharply contrasting sets of beliefs. Polarization describes the movement over time to more polarized views, but also the state of being polarized. Our analysis distinguishes between fragmented opinion, where public opinion is split but views are not strongly held, and polarized opinion, where public opinion is both split and concentrated at the extremes. Across a range of energy issues, we find areas of fragmented and polarized opinion, but areas of agreement as well. We are also able to demonstrate expectations in Canada for future changes in the energy sector (aka the “energy transition”), an area where there seems to be agreement.

Why should we care about polarization? Doesn’t it simply represent pronounced differences among political viewpoints? Certainly, political parties are expected to
provide distinct agendas for voters so that clear decisions about policy agendas can inform the political process. Not surprisingly, our research shows that party identification is one of the strongest drivers of opinion on energy issues.

However, a variety of concerns arise from highly polarized electorates. Democracies are generally more effective when differences are not concentrated in hardened extremes, with little support for the middle ground. At that point, it becomes much more difficult for governments to find political accommodation and undertake deal-making. Further, polarization is associated with political intolerance and lack of respect for differing opinions, a situation that over longer periods of time is incompatible with democratic politics.

Finally, polarized positions can lead to policy instability, in which businesses, markets and the public are subjected to radically different policy approaches and whipsaw as governments change. We’ve seen this on climate change policy at the federal level as Canada moved from the Harper government (withdrawal from Kyoto and low targets) to the Trudeau government (carbon tax commitments and legally binding targets for net-zero by 2050). We’ve seen a similar dynamic in the opposite direction as Ontario moved from the Liberals’ Green Energy Act (and expensive Feed-In Tariff programs to encourage renewable energy) to the new Conservative government’s cancellation of $230 million in green energy contracts.

In the energy and environmental sector, we see typically high levels of polarization and fragmentation. Yet it is not clear how energy polarization is different from disagreement in other political domains, and whether different kinds of factors drive levels of disagreement or agreement. We can see polarization clearly in a question about the carbon tax among the total national sample in figure 1. Polarization

FIGURE 1: “CANADA NEEDS TO HAVE A CARBON TAX THAT APPLIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY” (NATIONAL RESULTS)
is present when, as in figure 1, the distribution forms an inverted U shape, with most opinions at the extremes and few in the middle.

We can also see polarization between regions in figure 2, the regional graph for the same question (combining “strongly agree” with “agree” and “strongly disagree” with “disagree” to provide a clearer visual). Our results demonstrate that regional profile is a critical driver of opinion on energy and the environment. In this instance, our question on carbon tax shows that B.C., Ontario and Quebec, where a majority support a national carbon tax, are notably different from the Prairies, where a majority oppose it.

Our research also reveals other critical factors that drive disagreement over energy issues. The big picture is complicated, with multiple factors at play across differing kinds of questions, and our upcoming work will include regression analyses that address many factors simultaneously. But while a regional profile does not provide the whole picture, it is clear how strong the regional factor is in driving opinion.

The impact of regional energy profile is not limited to carbon taxes. We also see it with respect to nuclear power, a topic that is not completely polarized among the overall population, but is significantly differentiated among regions. In figure 3, you can see that attitudes toward nuclear power among the total population are fragmented – fairly evenly split across all opinion areas. However, the Regional profile is a critical driver of opinion on energy and the environment. B.C., Ontario and Quebec, where a majority support a national carbon tax, are notably different from the Prairies, where a majority oppose it.
regional distributions show deep divisions between regions that have nuclear power plants (Ontario) or economic activity devoted to uranium mining (Prairies) and regions without strong links (B.C. and Quebec). In Quebec, 48 per cent strongly or slightly oppose nuclear as a solution to global warming.

We also see regional differentiation over dimensions where Canadians have a stronger degree of agreement overall. As figure 4 illustrates, 52 per cent of Canadians overall optimistically believe that the country can develop oil sands and still meet its climate commitments (perhaps a version of Canada having its cake and eating it too?). While this is certainly not a consensus, the overall opinion numbers do show that Canadians lean strongly to the favourable side, with only a fifth in disagreement or strong disagreement. When we look at regions, we see that the Prairies overwhelmingly favour the statement, while Quebeckers are polarized – an even split on the issue.

Fortunately, there are some areas of agreement. Canadians strongly believe that we need more renewable energy, even with cost increases. This support plays out across every region in Canada, with only a small comparative dip in the Prairies.

Given the powerful role that regional opinion plays in Canada, what might we hope for? In short, we need stronger national

Canadians strongly believe that we need more renewable energy, even with cost increases. This support plays out across every region in Canada, with only a small comparative dip in the Prairies.
leadership willing to develop and create grand bargains across the disparate energy production systems. This is hard to do in a federal system with strong provincial powers over resource policy, but it is not impossible. Further, Canadians were clear in our survey work that they see the federal government as the primary level at which to develop a coherent vision for changes in the future energy system and the transition that will come over the next 30 years. The real question is whether Canada can lead as the energy superpower that it inherently is, or whether it will be dragged into a new energy paradigm in the midst of squabbling regional jurisdictions.

Notes

1 See https://www.uottawa.ca/positive-energy/
2 See a much broader set of data and results at “Polarization over Energy and Climate in Canada,” https://www.uottawa.ca/positive-energy/content/polarization-over-energy-and-climate-canada

Canadians see the federal government as the primary level at which to develop a coherent vision for changes in the future energy system and the transition that will come over the next 30 years.
Impossible things?

A conversation on climate change between Mark Jaccard and John Richards

John Richards is co-publisher of Inroads and Professor in the School of Public Policy at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Vancouver.

Mark Jaccard is Professor and Director of the School of Resource and Environmental Management at SFU.


Mark Jaccard has written a highly accessible book on the politics of climate change policy, *The Citizen’s Guide to Climate Success*. More than most academics in his field of national energy system modelling, Mark has provided pragmatic advice to governments interested in implementing effective policy. He played a role in the design of British Columbia’s 2008 carbon tax and its clean electricity regulation, two of the few significant Canadian initiatives over the last quarter century to curtail greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, this book does not discuss climate change modelling or the costs of renewables relative to fossil fuels. Rather, it explores the multiple psychological quirks of human choice, and the dynamics of self-serving interest group behaviour. Mark is a colleague at Simon Fraser University and we have discussed these issues for many years.

Following publication of his book, Mark agreed to an email exchange. I initiated the exchange by suggesting that a better opening chapter to his book would have been to invoke the Red Queen’s advice to Alice – which, adapted to the issue at hand, is that to implement successful climate change policy it is necessary that people come to believe what they currently insist are “impossible things.” In other words, climate success requires governments with authoritarian tendencies willing to advance policy founded on what the majority think impossible – public opinion be damned. Mark disagrees. Maybe he is right.

— John Richards
Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said. “One can’t believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*

You effectively make the case that we cannot meet the Paris Accord target (an increase in average world temperature no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius relative to the preindustrial era) without addressing political dynamics—which are subject to multiple psychological quirks of human choice and self-serving interest group behaviour. Realizing sufficiently large reductions in greenhouse gases to achieve zero net additions to the atmosphere by midcentury is, you conclude, politically very difficult. It is far from certain that we will realize the necessary reductions. I agree.
Canada’s dismal contribution to this goal deserves very little attention. Under Stephen Harper, between 2006 and 2015, Ottawa did nothing of substance. Admittedly, some provincial initiatives took place (for example, B.C.’s carbon tax and Ontario’s shutting down coal-based power plants). Under Justin Trudeau post-2015, Ottawa has talked a good deal about climate change, but not actually done much.

You begin with a detour into the two Gulf wars, the first waged by George H.W. Bush and the second by George W. Bush. Saddam Hussein attempted to persuade fellow Iraqis that Kuwait was rightfully a province of Iraq. With the levers that dictators have over public media, he persuaded most fellow Iraqis to support his invasion of Kuwait. Saddam’s delusion turned out to be an “impossible thing to believe.” George W. Bush tried to persuade Americans and allies that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction, a second delusion that became an “impossible thing to believe.” In other words, all of us, Iraqis under Saddam and Americans under “W,” can harbour delusions.

A better introduction, I suggest, would have been the Red Queen who, at one point, instructs Alice on the need for practice in believing “impossible things.” I suggest we need Red Queens who believe some set of “impossible things,” implement policy accordingly and
hope they can persuade the electorate in due course. The 2018 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) lays out four pathways, each of which achieves zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (see box). Each pathway, however, entails belief in some “impossible things” that at present the majority, like Alice, find laughable:

**PATHWAY 1:** The first scenario requires that the majority believe in the impossible forecast that innovations can simultaneously reduce energy demand and increase living standards, especially in the global South. A downsized energy system enables rapid decarbonization of energy supply. Afforestation is the only carbon dioxide removal option considered. There is no need for either fossil fuels with carbon capture and storage or bioenergy.

**PATHWAY 2:** This scenario requires naive faith in international cooperation with a broad focus on sustainability including energy intensity, human development, economic convergence, shifts toward sustainable and healthy consumption patterns (e.g., substitution of plant-based protein for red meat), low-carbon technology innovation and well-managed land systems. It requires some limited societal acceptability for carbon capture and storage, and bioenergy.

**PATHWAY 3:** This scenario implies that social as well as technological development follows historical patterns. In other words, final energy demand continues to grow. Central to this pathway is that we support universal acceptance of nuclear power. The scenario projects a fivefold increase in use of nuclear, a ninefold increase in nonbiomass renewables and a sevenfold increase in carbon capture and storage plus bioenergy. (At present, adding carbon capture from fossil-fuel power generation roughly doubles the cost per kilowatt-hour).

**PATHWAY 4:** A resource- and energy-intensive scenario in which economic growth and globalization lead to widespread adoption of greenhouse-gas-intensive lifestyles, including high demand for transportation fuels and livestock products. Emissions reductions are mainly achieved through technological means. We need faith in new technology removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, faith in carbon capture and storage and faith in bioenergy fuels.

We don’t have to believe *all* of the impossible things implicit in the four IPCC options, but to successfully implement any one of the pathways, democratic politicians will have to persuade us to believe in *some* things that the majority at present think are “impossible things.”

**Mark Jaccard**

I was not trying to explain the key causal factors of two decades of strife in Iraq-Syria. I was simply pointing out – for a U.S. readership of my book – that it is folly to assume that only people under the heel of a dictator are vulnerable to collective delusions. Even the United States, with its various checks on power to help reduce the chance of collective delusion, can be vulnerable. The people running the United States in 2001–2003, and much of the population, believed that overthrowing Saddam
would lead to less strife. That was a delusion. With hindsight, U.S. intervention obviously led to more strife. That’s all.

And by the way, my scepticism about carbon taxes does not mean I am anti–carbon taxes. Read my chapter and you’ll see that I am agnostic on policy instruments for GHG reduction – other than the idea that compulsory policies (being prices and/or regulation) must play a significant role because of the plentiful reserves of cheap fossil fuels. I am not against carbon pricing. What I am against is armchair politicians (mostly academic economists) who never try to get elected themselves and never dirty themselves in supplying real-world policy advice that might win key swing ridings and defeat climate-insincere politicians who lie successfully about carbon pricing. Climate-insincere politicians have no qualms about cavalierly convincing climate-sincere politicians to paint a carbon tax bullseye on their backs, even though the bullseye is not necessary for deep decarbonization.

I find your Alice Through the Looking Glass narrative confusing and unhelpful. It certainly does not help with the message of my book. IPCC reports – like the 1.5-degree rise report you cite – are in a strange no-man’s-land. They are written to communicate complexity because the authors don’t want to exclude any bit of evidence, nor anyone’s research. But that makes them useless for the public and decision-makers. My book is a sort of anti–IPCC report. Part of my strategy is to avoid the approach you are taking, with a complicated Alice story and reference to an even more complicated page from the IPCC. I cannot imagine any audience for this.

People keep saying that they get the book’s simple message. That is my impression from how it is being used as a resource on social media. I developed each of the stories over five years, getting feedback from grad students and third-year undergrads in the two courses in which I used earlier drafts.

I am not against carbon pricing. What I am against is armchair politicians who never try to get elected themselves and never dirty themselves in supplying real-world policy advice that might win key swing ridings and defeat climate-insincere politicians. – Mark Jaccard
Perhaps my Alice-and-Red-Queen narrative is “confusing and unhelpful,” but it summarizes my fears. For the multiple reasons you discuss, there is no present public acceptance of any policy initiative likely to achieve net zero emissions by midcentury. John Geddes writes in his (favourable) Maclean’s review of your book (“Solving the Climate Crisis Isn’t on Consumers. It’s on the People in Power,” January 30):

What’s to be done then? This is where the “citizen’s guide” part comes in. In his chapter on the limited potential for individuals to make progress by voluntarily changing how they live, Jaccard chides that “it’s time to stop feeling guilty about ourselves as consumers and start feeling guilty about ourselves as citizens.” He means we must start electing politicians who make real commitments on climate change and resolutely implement them. “We must be able to detect and elect climate-sincere politicians, and then pressure them to implement a few simple policies,” he writes, “such that any citizen can detect procrastination and evasion.”

On the assumption that we elected a climate-sincere government in 2019, how do we realize the required decarbonization of our economy? You write,

I am frequently asked by non-experts why they never hear about how to transform our energy system to prevent climate change. People are shocked at my response: energy analysts have publicly reported on this transformation with great fanfare since the 1980s ...

These [IPCC] studies produce a consistent takeaway message. First, we need several decades to fully transform the energy system for significant GHG reductions. Second, this can occur without major technological innovations, although cost-reducing innovations will continue as commercialized technologies increase market share. Third, the cost is manageable if we prioritize the lowest cost options and transform the energy system at a pace that reflects the replacement rate of electricity plants, industrial plants, vehicles, and buildings. This is the consensus view from assessments prepared by experts crafting a compromise summary of the leading evidence.

This is an excellent résumé of scientific opinion. But there remains a dilemma: how do we elect climate-sincere politicians willing to expend their political capital on “sincerely” pursuing one or more of the highly controversial climate change scenarios summarized by the IPCC?

I am pessimistic about achieving results with normal politicians, however climate-sincere they are. To cite three examples: Gordon Campbell (B.C. premier who successfully implemented the province’s carbon tax), Ken Livingstone (London mayor who introduced road pricing), Charles de Gaulle (who in the 1960s decided France would go nuclear and limit French dependence on Mideast oil). All had an authoritarian willingness to ride roughshod over short-term public opinion and over their respective legislative colleagues, and
bear the electoral consequences. Such leaders are rare. Hence, my image of the Red Queen lecturing citizens (i.e. Alice) on the need to practise belief in “impossible things.”

Mark Jaccard

You are arguing that we need exceptional politicians for deep decarbonization. I don’t agree. There are different conditions that, alone or combined, increase the chance of effective decarbonization policy:

- exceptional politicians – such as Gordon Campbell (one of your specific examples);
- policy window – a crisis that increases the chance of nonpartisan efforts (for example, Republicans and Democrats after Hurricane Katrina);
- institutional arrangements at the political level (U.S. checks and balances make it very difficult constitutionally to be proactive);
- social consensus on need for climate change policy (Scandinavia and Quebec today);
- institutions with long-term vision and regulatory authority (California today).

I resist your focus on exceptional politicians. The focus of my book is on how:

- Citizens need to create the policy support (my former student Kevin Washbrook, along with other climate-concerned citizens, did a masterful job across B.C. in helping create support for Campbell’s transformation from climate-insincere to climate-sincere).

- Policy advisers need to be realistic about the constraints when suggesting policy. As I keep saying, fossil fuels are truly fantastic – they bring major benefits and are cheap, so long as we ignore environmental costs – so this makes it tough to eliminate their use. Climate change is a global problem, so single-jurisdiction effort is constrained, especially with trade-exposed, emission-intensive industry. And we need to understand the flaws of electoral politics and policy-making (voter biases, focus on a few single-issue voters in key swing ridings, etc.).

Of course, a “great man” would be nice. But it is not an essential condition. Ironically, George W. Bush, as governor of Texas, put in a Renewable Portfolio Standard (a flexible regulation) that subsidized wind power, which in turn over the last two decades has messed up spot markets and therefore the ability to baseload coal and turn a profit. There was a general interest in renewables, and I am not sure his advisers realized how significant that policy would become. But how wonderful that people designed the policy and sold it on “the exciting technology of wind” rather than “this will kill off coal plants.” What is needed is opportunism like this and policies that don’t cause strong pushback. This is why, in the book, I explain that certain “flex-regs” are quite easy and have been implemented in many places. We need better policy advisers, who don’t simply repeat “we must price carbon” to sincere politicians.
Yuval Noah Harari sometimes annoys me with his overly confident oversimplifications but he is, like you, a very good vulgarizer (in the positive sense of the word). He recently wrote an article in the Financial Times on the need for social trust if we are to minimize deaths arising from the coronavirus (“The World after Coronavirus,” March 19). He acknowledges that, once China’s meritocratic dictatorship stopped denying the epidemic, it seemingly halted exponential growth of cases by employing mass electronic invasion of privacy and aggressive lockdown of Wuhan. He raises the question, in this article in terms of health: can we simultaneously maintain democratic institutions and conduct effective public policy? Harari is optimistic:

We can choose to protect our health and stop the coronavirus epidemic not by instituting totalitarian surveillance regimes, but rather by empowering citizens. In recent weeks, some of the most successful efforts to contain the coronavirus epidemic were orchestrated by South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. While these countries have made some use of tracking applications, they have relied far more on extensive testing, on honest reporting, and on the willing co-operation of a well-informed public ...

But to achieve such a level of compliance and co-operation, you need trust. People need to trust science, to trust public authorities, and to trust the media. Over the past few years, irresponsible politicians have deliberately undermined trust in science, in public authorities and in the media.

How to interpret Harari? There is apparently enough social trust among G-7 electorates in scientific opinion on appropriate public health policy that all seven – even the United States with inexcusable delay – have accepted the scientific conclusion on the value of “social isolation,” the closing of institutions that bring large numbers of people into close contact and aggressive testing of potential carriers. There remains the awkward fact that Harari acknowledges without elaboration: all countries that quickly suppressed the exponential growth of new cases (South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, to which can be added Hong Kong and Japan) are in East Asia. Their version of democracy incorporates what Lee Kwan Yew defined as Asian values: respect for family and national leaders, combined with Confucian obligations among the elite.

As we write (in early April 2020), the only public policy being discussed is the coronavirus pandemic. Hopefully, in 24 months we will have contained the virus, and done so with far fewer deaths than were caused by the Spanish flu a century ago. Let’s return to your book. You and I agree that if we fail to implement some version of the four IPCC pathways in the next quarter century, the world will face more severe climate change consequences than an uncontrolled coronavirus pandemic. I don’t see any of the leading politicians in the G-7 introducing climate change policy that qualifies as a credible commitment to some version of the IPCC pathways.
I admit that some “climate-sincere politicians” are tinkering, and some social democrats in Scandinavia deserve praise for bolder initiatives. I don’t see any in the G-7 advocating any of the Red Queen’s “impossible things.” Where are the politicians willing to support a massive increase in nuclear power and immediate shutdown (within the decade) of all fossil-fuel sources of electricity; willing to introduce sufficiently rigorous regulations (aggressive versions of your “flexible regulations”) that within, say, 15 years, eliminate all fossil-fuel vehicles; willing to discuss phaseout of the entire fossil-fuel sector in two decades and the required cost of redesigning regional economies such as Alberta; willing to tax red meat on grounds of public health and preservation of forest habitat?

There is a very low probability that you and I will die over the next 12 months as a result of the coronavirus. To minimize the low probability of death for ourselves, our family, our community, our country, we are willing to incur massive disruption of our
I admit that some “climate-sincere politicians” are tinkering, and some social democrats in Scandinavia deserve praise for bolder initiatives. I don’t see any in the G-7 advocating any of the Red Queen’s “impossible things.” – John Richards

daily lives for the coming months. One of the psychological quirks you discuss is myopia, the human tendency to discount at absurdly high rates the consequences of events that will take place, say, 50 years from now. If we apply no discount to the costs of future climate change, the consequences of “business as usual” climate policy are almost certainly worse than this pandemic. Over to you.

Mark Jaccard

My book is prescriptive. In it, I prescribe “the least-difficult strategic path for global success.” And I explain why other prescriptions, widely circulated, are more difficult because they rely on assumptions that don’t reflect what leading experts agree on. Some policy pundits say that carbon pricing is essential, yet leading experts know this is not true. Recognition that carbon pricing is not essential is important because an electoral campaign based on carbon pricing as the lead policy can enable the election of climate-insincere politicians, who once in power delay the implementation of effective climate policies.

Some policy pundits, and most governments, believe we can voluntarily achieve a global agreement with binding, effective compliance mechanisms. Diplomacy experts know that this is highly unlikely. Thus, instead of trying each year to reach this universal voluntary agreement, we need leading countries to implement carbon tariffs now, just as the Americans almost did in the mid-2000s and the Europeans are discussing seriously today as part of their Green Deal. Otherwise, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Kenya, Tanzania and other growing economies will base much of their electrification on new coal and natural gas plants. Although carbon tariffs by leading countries will be portrayed by some as a North attack on the South, they are in the best long-term interests of developing countries, which are the least able to cope with the calamities of profound and at times catastrophic GHG impacts.

These are just two of the nine delusions covered by each of my book chapters. We need to get more (not all) climate-concerned citizens and climate-sincere politicians to understand and overcome the myths I discuss if we are to increase our already low chances of success with this global challenge. To do this, we needn’t portray the challenge as requiring profound transformation of our lives (read my chapter on behavioural change!). People won’t know that their electricity doesn’t come
from a coal plant. People won’t remember the slight difference between an electric car and a gasoline car (other than that my electric car has much greater acceleration!). People won’t remember if their house is heated by natural gas or electricity (35 per cent are already heated by electricity in B.C.!). We must not portray this challenge as more difficult than it is from a technical, behavioural, economic and political perspective.

Now, if we do take more serious action on climate, what will it look like from a societal and governance perspective? You use Harari’s essay on diverse responses to the COVID-19 pandemic to ask if success requires autocratic government control of citizens. I see no evidence that this is necessary. It was the Obama-led U.S. government that reached a promising bilateral agreement with the Chinese government in 2014 to link their climate targets and eventually their policies. Of course, for success, they needed to follow this with carbon tariffs. But governments of very different stripes can work together for a common global cause, just as the U.K. and U.S. joined forces with the undemocratic USSR to defeat the global threat of Nazi Germany and militaristic Japan in World War II. Similarly, China is now rapidly reducing urban air pollution and acid emissions that democratic governments dramatically reduced over a decade ago. From what I have seen, the nature of the government does not matter for the environmental outcome.

Back to prescription versus prediction. The prescription of my book is that the actions needed to decarbonize rich countries and even developing countries are not that costly, and that the (mostly) flexible regulatory policies needed to cause these actions are not that politically difficult. But my prediction – if you ask me for it – is that humanity is likely to continue with baby steps and even backward steps for far too long, perhaps even another two decades. And this means we’ll be forced to adopt “Hail Mary” technologies that block solar radiation, refreeze Greenland, shift rising seas into the Sahara, raise dikes along our coastlines, suck carbon out of the atmosphere and so on.

The reason is that delusions held by both climate-concerned and climate-unconcerned citizens make the challenge far more difficult than necessary. Self-interest motivates some people (some of them very powerful) to use delusions to convince the rest of society that we still need fossil fuel projects. But even climate-concerned people harbour delusions
that make the path more difficult, such as wishful thinking biases that renewables and efficiency are lower-cost than fossil fuels (which inadvertently justifies government policy procrastination). Or holding rigid pro and con positions on our options, such as the belief that “nuclear must be part of the solution,” even though leading academic research does not support this. Or hitching agendas that make the project more ambitious than it need be, such as requiring the complete abolition of global capitalism to succeed (à la Naomi Klein).

I wrote my book to try to reduce the probability that these myths will continue to reduce our chance of success. Thank you, John, for this opportunity to elaborate.
Leadership campaigns in the time of COVID-19

An introduction by Henry Milner

The pandemic has upset many plans. One, trivial when compared to the terrible wider changes it has brought, was our plan for the content and distribution of this issue of Inroads. Writing about subjects affected daily by the pandemic is like aiming at a moving target. Take the leadership campaigns of the two parties that dominated Quebec politics for nearly half a century but have fallen on hard times: the Parti Québécois and the Quebec Liberals. A key aspect of Inroads’ mandate is to report on Quebec developments and in the late fall we commissioned two keen observers of Quebec politics, Anne Michèle Meggs and Eric Montigny, to write about the two campaigns. Both were slated for the spring. One is effectively on hold; the other just came to an unexpected abrupt end. With media attention in Quebec focused on responses to the pandemic by Premier Legault and his CAQ government, coverage of the campaigns and their implications has been sparse. In this context, Anne Michèle and Eric’s insightful contributions are especially valuable.
The political consequences of the coronavirus pandemic are easy to see in Quebec, notably with regard to the Parti Québécois leadership race that was officially launched on February 1, with results to be announced on June 19. Like so much else, plans had to be changed after the pandemic struck. But first, we need to set the stage.

Pre-crisis situation: A party trying to rebuild

The Parti Québécois came out of the October 1, 2018, election with 17.1 per cent of the popular vote, the lowest percentage in its history. With 10 seats in the National Assembly, it ended up behind the Liberals and tied with the more left-leaning sovereigntist Québec Solidaire (QS). However, it lost its status as second opposition party to QS because one PQ MNA quit the party shortly after the election to sit as an independent, leaving the PQ in last place in the National Assembly.
Both the PQ and the Quebec Liberal Party were hurt badly by the backlash against traditional parties and the turn toward more populist parties that has been witnessed in other Western democracies in recent years. The self-styled nationalist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), headed by François Legault, picked up 74 of the 125 seats with 37.4 per cent of the vote. One explanation for the move of many PQ supporters to the CAQ and QS in 2018 lies in the dubious strategy adopted by PQ leader Jean-François Lisée on the national question: a promise to hold a referendum after 2022 once he was elected to a second term. As a result, many left-leaning sovereigntists, especially young people, switched to Québec Solidaire, which was able to win several seats outside its Montreal base. Simultaneously, with independence off the table, it was easy for many francophone nationalists who lean to the right to switch from the PQ to the “anti-establishment” CAQ headed by a popular former PQ cabinet minister. (Non-francophones didn’t trust Legault’s federalist stance and stuck with the Liberals.)

The PQ establishment realized that a serious renewal was called for if the PQ were to climb its way back up to serious party status again. Lisée resigned, an interim leader was named and the leadership race was postponed to allow time for a renewal process to take place. The reasoning was that as a result of this process the leadership candidates would be bound to the will of the party members. Whether that reasoning was sound remains to be seen.
So in the spring of 2019, a special policy convention was called for the fall of that year. The objective of the convention would be to adopt a new “Statement of Principles” and new statutes, restructuring the party. The process was also designed to rally support and reach out to new members. As it turned out, the mobilizing efforts were far from successful. The process got very little media coverage and, with so few ridings represented by PQ MNAs, no adequate organization was in place even to reach existing members effectively.

The convention nevertheless was held in November 2019 and a new Statement of Principles was adopted, as well as new statutes. The statement puts an emphasis on independence (the vocabulary has moved away from sovereignty), without proposing any timeline. The challenges addressed are the permanence of the French language, along with climate change, inequality and trust in democratic institutions. It lays out in four paragraphs the fundamental values guiding the party:

• freedom – Quebec will only be free once its citizens are;
• justice and equity – the health of a society is measured by its level of well-being and quality of life;
• nationalism – defined by the PQ as a value of openness, inclusion and unity;
• protection of the inherited environment as an expression of Quebec’s identity.

At least one attempt to add a reference to social democracy to the statement was voted down.

The revised statutes create a new category of “sympathizers” (sympathisants). For $5, anyone can sign up to be a PQ sympathizer and vote for the new leader, without being a party member (party membership costs $10 and allows one to stand for office within the party and be an observer at party meetings that are not in camera). This “sympathizer” category would seem to be largely geared to filling party coffers, but it also makes the outcome of the leadership race more difficult to call for reasons which will be discussed later.

The Campaign Coordinating Committee set a spending limit of $125,000, including a nonrefundable $25,000 payment to the party to get on the leadership ballot. Only donations from individuals eligible to vote in Quebec are accepted, all must go through the office of the Chief Electoral Officer and the maximum individual donation allowed is $500 (in elections, the maximum donation allowed is $100). Finally, each candidate must gather 2,000 signatures of active PQ members from at least 50 ridings and nine regions. The original deadline for submission of applications – including the $25,000 and 2,000 signatures – was April 9, with the results of the vote (online or by phone) to be announced at a big event on June 19, just before Quebec’s national holiday (the Fête Nationale, still commonly referred to by its former name of La Saint-Jean) on June 24.

But it was not to be. The first COVID-19 case in Quebec was detected on February 28. Three weeks later, the deadline for the submission of nomination papers was pushed to April 30, and then it was suspended entirely. The collection of signatures and donations were suspended at the end of March. At the time of writing, announcement of the final vote was
scheduled for August 28, which will allow the party to have a new leader before the fall session begins (virtually?) in September.

The ex-minister, the comedian and the others

With all attention focused on dealing with the effects of the virus, no one is much interested in the campaign among the six candidates. The party has had a very difficult time convincing a woman to run. The most obvious female contender, MNA Véronique Hivon, announced early on that she would not be in the race, and it wasn’t until the second week in March that Gloriane Blais announced her candidacy. Blais, however, is a complete unknown outside her Mégantic region, where she ran and lost four times. By mid-April, she had raised $175 according to the Chief Electoral Officer’s website.

One of the five male candidates, Laurent Vézina, is also an unknown, so the contest is among four white francophone men, all between 43 and 51 years of age, which doesn’t do a whole lot to project an image of change.

Sylvain Gaudreault is the only candidate with a long and solid history in the party. He is openly gay, married, an MNA from the Saguenay region for more than 13 years, and a respected former minister in Pauline Marois’s PQ government (2012–14). His website and – more importantly in this campaign so dependent on social media – his Facebook page present concrete proposals linked to coming out of the COVID-19 crisis. He clearly understands the tools of government. His proposal relies heavily on green infrastructure projects and a green economy, including transitional programs to train workers for the new types of jobs this will involve. He even proposes to negotiate full constitutional powers over the environment for Quebec.

He is inclusive in his approach to what it means to be a Quebecker and decidedly leans to the left of the political spectrum. He supports the idea of a referendum during the first mandate, while recognizing that it is an uphill battle. He has so far the public support of two current and three former PQ MNAs and, interestingly, that of Lucie Papineau, former MNA and riding president for Prévost where rival Paul St-Pierre Plamondon ran in 2018. While he is a competent and articulate speaker, as evidenced in his videos, and sets out his position well, his often acknowledged lack of charisma could be his biggest drawback, given that he is running against a professional stage performer (see below). He had raised over $42,000 by mid-April, perhaps a sign that his experience and party networks are working in his favour.

Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, at 43 the youngest of the candidates, has raised only slightly
less money than Gaudreault. He is a lawyer who joined the PQ and started contributing to it financially in 2016, when he entered the leadership race after the resignation of Pierre-Karl Péladeau. While he sought to take advantage of his network as cofounder of Génération d’Idées, whose mission was to encourage young Quebecers to become politically and socially involved, his ambition to enter party politics did not go over especially well. After his results on the first ballot were in the single digits, he threw his support, such as it was, to Jean-François Lisée. This was enough to get Lisée over the finish line, and PSPP, as he is known, was rewarded with a contract to prepare a report on how to widen the party’s base, particularly among young people, but the recommendations were not very well received by a party composed largely of boomers.

PSPP notes that he has lived and studied in Sweden but avoids identifying Sweden as any kind of model, instead staying very safe in his positions: pro-environment, pro–equality for women, pro-independence – nothing that would allow him to be identified to the right or the left. His platform, which ignores the diversity dimension, targets suburban rather than urban voters. He proposes a referendum in his first mandate and lowering immigration levels by close to 30 per cent to protect the French language.

Frédéric Bastien, a historian who teaches at Montreal’s anglophone Dawson College, has little to say except on matters of identity politics. There are two pillars to his platform: constitutional confrontation and cutting immigration levels by half. A fervent defender of the secularism legislation adopted by the current Legault government, he has “outed” judges he feels are too biased in favour of multiculturalism to ensure they change their behaviour or recuse themselves from rendering decisions on the legislation. He does this by checking which organizations they have agreed to speak to publicly. His has gleefully filled his Facebook page with media stories about the Supreme Court of Canada’s decision not to hear an appeal to suspend the secularism legislation and about the problems Hasidic Jews are having with the pandemic.

On the question of a referendum on independence, unlike the other candidates he would wait for his second term. Note that when Lisée took this position in 2018, Bastien published a book severely criticizing Lisée’s campaign and complaining that Lisée had not listened to him. He has nevertheless gained a
high profile, which probably explains why he has managed to raise $23,000, almost enough to cover the amount he will need to recover the deposit required to get on the ballot.

A significant complicating factor in the race is the entry of standup comic Guy Nantel, who joined the party in order to run. While the candidate the most in a hurry to have a referendum, to be held within two years of his being elected, he suggested in an interview with Le Devoir that it be on a form of sovereignty-association, a proposal effectively rejected by the party after the unsuccessful 1980 referendum on that question. In a book published in 2017, Nantel sets out a number of his political positions, from appealing to anglophones by declaring English a national minority language and adding an English symbol to the Quebec flag to a National Assembly made up of 200 MNAs – 100 elected on a purely proportional basis and another 100 picked lottery-style from a list of interested citizens. And, to his credit, he holds that immigration is a plus for Quebec. He devotes much effort to breaking down in lay terms the figures on equalization and other federal programs, to demonstrate that Canada gets more from Quebec than Quebec gets from Canada.

Much of Nantel’s humour is socially and politically based, but it is largely mockery, including of politicians and political parties in general. Aside from his standup shows, he has made quite a name doing short “person-on-the-street” videos for YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, designed to illustrate the low level of political and general knowledge of Quebecers. During the campaign, he has on an almost daily basis been producing six- to seven-minute videos on various subjects, including policies to put in place after the pandemic linked to energy or food self-sufficiency. Others, though, have mocked people he feels go overboard with social distancing.

Still, he cannot be discounted given his prominence – he has 80,000 Facebook fans – and the fact that he has some well-known party organizers behind him. While he had raised less than $15,000 by mid-April, he started at the top among respondents who identified as PQ voters in the only poll published so far (in mid-February) with 38 per cent, compared to 16 per cent for Gaudreault, 5 per cent for PSPP and 4 per cent for Bastien, with 36 per cent undecided.

But it is only PQ members and sympathizers who will be voting. In the context of Quebec’s
having to deal with the pandemic and its consequences, could they prefer a comedian over the more sober and experienced Gaudreault? At this point the deadline for recruiting members and sympathizers for voting purposes is August 1. The campaign was officially paused at the end of March, and little recruiting is taking place—although it is possible to sign up on the party website. The wild card is whether Guy Nantel’s fans will actually go to the trouble of signing up as sympathizers.

The pandemic crisis and beyond

As noted, any messages the candidates are managing to get out are carried strictly on social media. None of the mainstream media are picking up on the campaign. So it will probably be some time before any more polling is done. With no party events, it became impossible to gather original signatures, so the party changed the rules to allow for scanned handwritten signatures. Then the process was suspended on March 30. As it stands, when the decision is taken to start up again, the candidates will be allowed to resume fundraising and will have three weeks to collect signatures. A preliminary voters’ list will be provided to the official candidates within five days, but all emails to the voters will be channelled through the party. The rules now allow for the two debates before August 20 to be held by video streaming, with voting to take place August 24 to 28.

Parties normally count on leadership campaigns to boost membership and finances and to whip up some enthusiasm through publicly attended debates and a rousing final announcement event with as many party members as possible squeezed into a limited space. But in the spring and, presumably, summer of 2020, attention is elsewhere. With the pandemic upending democratic processes in Quebec as elsewhere, how many will even bother to vote? It is hard not to wonder what difference it makes who the PQ leader is when the current Premier, like many other heads of government, has popularity ratings off the charts.

However, these popularity figures may well fall dramatically before the next election in 2022, when the economic fallout of the pandemic sinks in. Will the independence movement and its leaders be able to take advantage of the current drive toward self-sufficiency? Will they gain traction in reminding the population of how many important decisions were dependent on another level of government, or will it be the federalists who gain from pointing to the collaborative initiatives taken with the federal government and other provinces to get through the crisis? A lot will depend on how François Legault, himself a former PQ minister, chooses to present himself and his party in the runup to the 2022 election. Stay tuned.
The leadership race that never was

The Quebec Liberals missed their chance at a new start

By Eric Montigny

It’s not just a cliché: the choice of a new leader is decisive for the very future of the Quebec Liberal Party. In 2018, the Liberals suffered the worst election loss in their history. After four years in government, they won less than 25 per cent of the vote and elected only 32 members of the National Assembly out of 125. That number has since been reduced to 28, none of them representing ridings located east of the Montreal metropolitan area. Though still the official opposition, the Liberals are in effect a minor party among francophone voters.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, only two candidates entered the race, a race that has faded from view in the shadow of the COVID-19 crisis. Of the two, Dominique Anglade was widely seen as the favourite, even though she had relatively shallow roots in the party. Former president of François Legault’s Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), now in power, she was recruited by the Liberals, ran successfully in a 2015 byelection and was then appointed to the cabinet in 2017 by Premier Philippe Couillard. Anglade’s opponent, Alexandre Cusson, was a newcomer to Quebec politics, though well known at the municipal level. Former mayor of the middle-sized city of Drummondville, east of Montreal, he had been chosen president of the Union des Municipalités du Québec.

The winner of the planned closed primary was originally to be announced on May 31. In light of the COVID-19 crisis, the race was put on hold on March 20. But on May 11, Cusson announced that he was stepping out of the race. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, he stated,
he did not see the race resuming until 2021. Not financially independent, he could not see how he could sustain his campaign for such a long time. The party wasted no time: on the same day it announced that Dominique Anglade would take over as the Liberals’ new leader.

**A disoriented party**

Long before the COVID-19 crisis, the Quebec Liberal Party was going through its own existential crisis. This is a party with a rich history, known for its adaptability and intimately associated with the history of Quebec. It is the only existing political party whose history goes back to the very beginnings of the Quebec party system, with representatives elected to the Quebec parliament in every election since 1867. Over the years, its program found its way into many of Quebec’s major social, economic and cultural policies.

In terms of adaptability, while the Liberals were originally fiercely opposed to the creation of the Canadian federation, in our time they became its most ardent defender (though, it must be said, they have never accepted the unilateral patriation of the Constitution in 1982). In the 1960s, the Liberal Party under Jean Lesage ushered in the Quiet Revolution. By the time of Jean Charest (premier from 2003 to 2012) and Philippe Couillard, however, the party’s orientation had gone from state building to “reengineering” the state, with an emphasis on budgetary austerity. In the 1970s, Robert Bourassa made French the only official language of Quebec. Today, his party’s electoral base has largely been reduced to the anglophone community.

This is not the first time the Quebec Liberal Party has found itself in a period of crisis. One indicator of both its importance and its precariousness is that, as the late political scientist Vincent Lemieux pointed out, it gave birth to its main adversaries. In the 1930s, Maurice Duplessis’s Union Nationale, which dominated Quebec for the next generation, emerged from the amalgamation of the Conservative Party and dissident Liberals who had formed the Action Libérale Nationale. In the late 1960s, René Lévesque left the Liberal Party to found the Mouvement Souveraineté-Association, which became the Parti Québécois. Thirty years later, in the wake of the 1992 Charlottetown Accord referendum, Mario Dumont and Jean Allaire left the Liberals to found the Action Démocratique du Québec, which merged in 2012 with the CAQ, now the dominant party. In each case, it should be noted, the Liberals were able to rise again.

But as also noted, never before has the Liberal Party appeared as weak as it does today. Dominique Anglade takes over a party...
operating in a fragmented four-party system in the National Assembly. The Liberals are struggling to redefine themselves in a political universe where the divide between the Yes and No sides on independence is no longer the defining cleavage. With an aging membership and unfilled coffers, the Quebec Liberal Party has to take on the autonomist but not sovereignist CAQ, which occupies the economic space that had been its trademark.

**A new formula for selecting the leader**

The last time the Liberals chose a leader, to replace Jean Charest in 2013, Philippe Couillard was elected using the traditional convention formula. Delegates lined up to vote for one of the three former ministers seeking the leadership. Couillard won a majority in the first round so there was no need for further ballots.

This time, for the first time in their history, the Liberals decided not to choose their leader at a convention. There were to be no delegates. The vote would have taken place in a closed primary in which all party members would be entitled to vote. This formula was chosen because it was seen as providing an opportunity to remobilize the party’s base.

Given the party’s weakness off Montreal Island, ballots were not going to be counted on a one-member-one-vote basis. To mitigate the overrepresentation of Montrealers as well as older Quebeckers in the membership, the vote would have been calculated using a point system. Each of the 125 constituencies had 2,000 points to be allocated to the candidates in proportion to the percentage of votes received from members aged 26 and over. In addition, 125,000 points would have been allocated on a Quebec-wide basis in proportion to the votes received from members aged 25 and under. No wonder the party’s youth commission had been intensely courted by the candidates.

The party planned to use preferential voting to allow voters to rank candidates. With only two eligible candidates, however, this was moot. At the end of the race, voting was to have taken place by telephone and online over a period of at least five consecutive days.

**A missed repositioning opportunity**

A well-organized leadership race is an opportunity to discuss and question party priorities and allow members to take back their party. After the Liberals held power with only a brief interruption over a 15-year period, a competitive race could have been, as hoped, an occasion to mobilize the membership and thus revitalize internal democracy. But a race can also be divisive. Once several higher-profile figures whose names had come up declined – including three sitting MNAs (Gaëtan Barrette, André Fortin and Marwah Rizqy) as
well as former ministers Denis Coderre and Pierre Moreau – the relatively low profile of the remaining candidates made both the revitalization and the division less likely.

Dominique Anglade managed to officially submit her nomination in late January, while Alexandre Cusson submitted his in early March. The rules required a $50,000 deposit and the signatures of 750 members from at least 70 constituencies and 12 regions, and at least 250 had to have joined the party after May 5, 2019. Anglade, with 13 MNAs behind her, had the support of the majority of caucus members. That level of backing consolidated the perception that she was the favourite. Cusson, who started later, had the support of only two MNAs.

As the campaign began Cusson went on the attack, so the imposed pause was experienced as a real truce. Cusson’s campaign put forward few policy proposals. He concentrated on questioning Dominique Anglade’s Liberal roots and stressing ethical concerns to distance himself from previous Liberal regimes, but did not garner much public attention. For her part, Anglade did not offer many policy commitments. A priority was to be the adoption of a Charter of Regions, understandable for a candidate seen as being too Montreal-based. Unlike her opponent, she also made it clear that she would let the courts determine the fate of Bill 21, the secularism act passed by the CAQ government. She would therefore not renew the notwithstanding clause when it expires.

A new start?

Long before the COVID-19 crisis, the Liberal leadership race was conducted in a climate of relative indifference on the part of both the press and the population. Dominique Anglade initially opposed any suspension of the race because of the crisis. Although she quickly changed her mind, this episode raised doubts about her political judgement. At the time Cusson dropped out, little was known about the wider concerns of the two candidates. The debates were expected to allow them to distinguish themselves and set out their priorities and deeper goals. The unforeseen pause could have given them the time and opportunity to rework their discourse and better articulate their vision in debates that could break down the wall of indifference and shed light on the contest. But it was not to be.

In hindsight, this race emerges as a missed opportunity. Dominique Anglade achieved her goal, but at what cost? A coronation in the shadow of the Covid-19 crisis, where all attention is on François Legault and his government. It is hard to see how the change of leadership will prove to be the new start Liberals were seeking.

Dominique Anglade initially opposed any suspension of the race during the COVID-19 crisis. Although she quickly changed her mind, this episode raised doubts about her political judgement.
The uninformed, the misinformed and the disinformed

Politically motivated ignorance and the cult of Trump

By Henry Milner

Henry Milner is a political scientist and co-publisher of Inroads. His recent article "Populism and Political Knowledge: The United States in Comparative Perspective" appeared in Politics and Governance, Vol. 8, No. 1 [2020], pp. 226–238, https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i1.2560

Modern liberal democracy is understood to combine majoritarian decision making, respect for the rights of minorities and freedom of expression. In the context of what is happening today, we need to add another dimension: the capacity to resolve disagreement through appeals to objective facts. This is new. In the lifetime of my boomer generation, we have assumed that while liberal democracies would always contain extremists living in their own realities, these would be kept to a politically ineffective minority and the great majority would accept that “you are entitled to your own opinion, but not to your own facts.”

More concretely, the willingness and ability of most citizens in liberal democracies to make decisions based on objective facts has been an unstated assumption in the academic literature assessing and comparing levels and effects of political knowledge, to which I have contributed for the last two decades. The generally low level of political knowledge detected in this research in the United States – and, typically to a lesser extent, elsewhere – has generally thus been understood as a manifestation of low political interest and attentiveness.
Usually, we found that the many respondents who lacked basic political knowledge were also politically passive. While we were concerned about the negative effect on the quality of democracy of a large and apparently growing proportion of citizens deficient in what I termed “civic literacy,” and the tendency of these citizens to become “political dropouts,” we did not see this as a threat to democracy per se. It was assumed that when circumstances warranted, they would become more attentive, seeking out missing information via mass communications media that could be counted on, as long as freedom of expression and the press was guaranteed, to adequately provide the needed facts.

These assumptions allowed us to treat a wrong answer to a political knowledge question as equivalent to “don’t know.” In other words, we assumed that being misinformed was, for research purposes, no different from being uninformed. Recent developments force us to question these assumptions, something we are just beginning to do. As I have been closely following developments in the contemporary United States, I have concluded that we can no longer count on the large number of politically misinformed Americans to be open to becoming informed.

The academic literature has not yet caught up with these developments, however. I could find only one research paper investigating the distinction between uninformed and misinformed, and it uses European data. Three U.K.-based political scientists, Stijn van Kessel, Javier Sajuria and Steven M. Van Hauwaert, test “to what extent misinformation, i.e. the possession of erroneous political information, stimulates populist party support. Survey data from nine European democracies [finds] populist party supporters differ from abstainers and non-populist party supporters in terms of their political information and misinformation, ... political misinformation relates positively to support for right-wing populist parties.”¹

It’s time to build into our analysis and research the reality that for many Trump supporters, political ignorance is not a matter of being uninformed, but rather of being systematically misinformed. They are ignorant by the standards of our political knowledge tests, but they do not see themselves that way – quite the opposite. This reality requires rethinking the assumptions underlying an entire body of literature, addressing worrisome possibilities only now being perceived. As Jonathan Rauch and Benjamin Wittes put it in a 2017 Brookings Institution study:

We assumed that being misinformed was, for research purposes, no different from being uninformed. Recent developments force us to question these assumptions.

¹ The literature on voter ignorance is one of the oldest, best established, and most dismaying in all of political science ... In recent years, however, a wave of research has shown ignorance and irrationality to be even bigger problems than previously believed ... Neither theory nor practice
supports the idea that [it can be reduced] in an environment dominated by extreme partisans and narrow interest groups.\textsuperscript{2}

Recent findings substantiate these concerns. We begin with a 2018 online survey of 2,606 American adults online by Ian Anson of the University of Maryland as to their political knowledge.\textsuperscript{3} He found that those who performed worse were more likely to overestimate their performance. “When I asked partisans to ‘grade’ political knowledge quizzes filled out by fictional members of the other party, low-skilled respondents gave out scores that reflected party biases much more than actual knowledge.” This was especially the case among Republicans.

Similarly, in 2018, two political scientists at Brigham Young University, Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope, carried out online surveys of almost 1,600 respondents who completed a political knowledge quiz, which asked five questions. Group loyalty, they found, “is the stronger motivator of opinion than are any ideological principles.” Republicans use partisan cues to judge peers’ political knowledge to a greater extent than do Democrats, coinciding with the polarization in the American electorate: “Low-knowledge respondents, strong Republicans, Trump-approving respondents, and self-described conservatives are the most likely to behave like party loyalists by accepting the Trump cue.”\textsuperscript{4}

Richard Fording of the University of Alabama and Sanford Schram of Hunter College in New York reported in 2017 on a study concluding that the Trump campaign exploited a void of facts and reasoning among “low information voters ... that made them more vulnerable to relying on emotions about Mexican immigrants, Muslim refugees, and African-American citizens, as well as their disdain for the first African-American President, Barack Obama, [leaving] ... Trump supporters less in a position to want or be able to question Trump’s ... campaign of misstatements, untruths, and lies.”\textsuperscript{5} They noted that in 2016 preference for Trump among those low in political knowledge was 20 per cent higher than among others, yet nothing similar had been found in 2012 about preferences for Republican nominee Mitt Romney.

What we are seeing thus is politically motivated ignorance: the misinformed not only assume that they are informed, but they dismiss anyone challenging their (mis)understanding as being politically motivated and, if anything, become even more convinced of the untruths they believe to be true. Hence Trump’s support has proven effectively unshakable despite revelations of the more than 17,000 false or misleading statements he has uttered in office.
at the time of this writing, according to fact-checkers (see box 1 above).

Hence the negative portrayal of Trump in the media has, if anything, bolstered his supporters in their views: the more strongly his statements – however distant from the facts – attack the “elitist liberals” or “the Democrats,” the more fervent their support appears to be. As one supporter told conservative commentator David Brooks, “This is war and he is our leader” – a war against, notably, the “lamestream” news organizations, the “enemies of the American people.”

Politically the priority for Trump is to mobilize his hard-core base, composed primarily of older, white, less educated, more rural males in the “red” states, which are overrepresented in the Senate and Electoral College. He seeks to train their attention away from his own policies and toward opposing an unpatriotic, overeducated, out-of-touch urban elite.

At this writing, this base remains large enough to effectively keep Republican legislators, who fear defeat in the primaries more than in the general election, in line. Hence the solid congressional support for Trump during impeachment, even though, as Alex Carp notes in the January 6 issue of New York magazine, “some of Trump’s most loyal supporters in Congress despise him in private.”

**From the Washington Post, January 10, 2020:**

“President Trump held his longest campaign rally to date on Dec. 18, just as the House was voting to impeach him. We measured how much of what Trump said was accurate and how much was false. That meant going through Trump’s often-dizzying remarks line-by-line, nearly 12,000 words in total, analyzing every statement he presented as fact ... Of the 179 statements we identified, 67 percent were false, mostly false or devoid of evidence. That’s 120 fact-free claims, or two-thirds of the total ...”

“At the December rally in Michigan, Trump falsely claimed he won the state’s ‘man of the year’ award. He falsely claimed to have set military spending records. He claimed – again, falsely – that 401[k] retirement accounts have gained up to 90 percent in value during his presidency. He falsely claimed Michigan had more auto industry jobs. He inflated the attendance at his rally and made up stories about several Democratic rivals. He took credit for major legislation and economic growth trends and NATO spending that came well before he took office. And on and on and on.”
Carp explains why with a quote from veteran Republican strategist Rick Wilson:

*A friend of mine, a member of Congress, went home to a town-hall meeting, and a guy asks him, “Are you going to be with Mr. Trump 100 percent of the time?” And he goes, “Well, look, I support Donald Trump and I want to help him, and we agree on many things. But I represent this district. If there’s something the president wants to do and it’s good for us, we’re absolutely going to do it. If it’s something that’s bad for our district, I’m going to oppose it.” By the time he left the stage, his wife had death threats. His kids had death threats.*

Most Republican elites who are appalled by Trump as a person are, it would appear, still more appalled by policies seeking to redistribute wealth. They continue to support him, just as their libertarian views have not impeded them from supporting social-conservative causes opposed to the rise of secularism and seeking to maintain traditional gender relations in order to attract votes to the Republican side.

Seeing the mainstream media as the enemy, the Trumpites look elsewhere for information. As a result, they seldom need to reject information contesting their understanding, since it doesn’t reach them in the first place. Indeed, less and less communication crosses the political divide. Here exceptional American institutions play a key part, beginning with the media environment. The Trumpites get their information from Fox News and other pro- Trump electronic media sources like Breitbart, Sinclair, Trinity Broadcasting Network and Nexstar.

One study analyzing millions of American news stories concluded that, unlike most news outlets that seek to adhere to facts and run corrections of false reports, conservative media are more concerned with confirming their audience’s biases, fearing angry reactions to exposures of falsehoods from core viewers. Moreover, as Jane Mayer noted in the New Yorker on March 11, 2019, on Fox News when falsehoods are exposed, core viewers often react angrily, noting that after Fox News anchor Shepard Smith contradicted Trump’s scaremongering about immigrants, viewers lashed out at him on social media.

Beneath the surface, added to the one-sided information Trumpites get from the pro-Trump media, are their links to social media that render them prey to “deep fakes.” Christopher Wylie, the whistleblower about Cambridge Analytica, has explained how this was done in an important new book (reviewed by Arthur Milner elsewhere in this issue). Box 2 gives a taste of Wylie’s revelations.
From Christopher Wylie, *Mindf*uck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America, pp. 119–122:

“Data was collected to select ... the minority of people [who] exhibit traits of the ‘dark triad,’ narcissism ... ruthless self interest ... and emotional detachment ... The team was able to identify people who exhibited the traits and those who were prone to more compulsive anger and conspiratorial thinking. [Cambridge Analytica] would target them introducing narratives via Facebook groups, ads, or articles that the firm knew from internal testing would likely inflame them ... CA wanted to provoke people ... because of the specific feature of Facebook’s algorithm which [in this case liking an extreme group] ... marks the user as distinct ... The site’s algorithm will start to funnel the user similar stories and pages – all to increase engagement. For Facebook, rising engagement is the only metric that matters, as more engagement means more screen time to be exposed to advertisements.”

Moreover, “the most engaging content on social media is often horrible or engraging” because humans “evolved to pay keen attention to potential threats.” CA then developed pages with right-wing content on Facebook and elsewhere which would “pop up” in the feeds of people who liked similar content. When users joined CA’s fake groups, it would post “videos and articles that would further provoke and inflame them to post messages that of support.” Once there was a large enough number in a given locality where they would “feed off each other’s paranoia ... People would get more and more fired up at what they saw as us versus them ... In time you’ve created a statewide movement of neurotic, conspiratorial citizens, one effect of which, in targeted close states, could alter the result by increasing turnout for Republicans.”
As Aaron Rupar reported on March 3,

According to data compiled by CrowdTangle, the most total interactions on Facebook came on a Fox News article about a federal judge granting a request from a right-wing group named Judicial Watch to make [Hillary] Clinton sit for a sworn deposition about her use of a private email server when she was secretary of state.

In fact, as this is written early Tuesday afternoon, stories from right-wing sources about Clinton’s emails represent three of the top 10 and five of the 20 top-performing news stories on Facebook over the past 24 hours ...

What you won’t find in Facebook’s top 20 news stories, however, is Super Tuesday coverage, anything published by a left-of-center outlet, or anything that’s critical of President Donald Trump or his administration ...

What explains the predominance of right-wing outlets on Facebook? According to Judd Legum, who reports extensively on Facebook in his Popular Information newsletter ...

“Facebook is optimized for Trump supporters ... It rewards engagement, which mostly reflects an emotional reaction to things. Support for Trump is largely emotional, not factual. So pro-Trump content does very very well.” ...

Legum has detailed how Ben Shapiro’s Daily Wire spreads its content around Facebook with help from “a clandestine network of 14 large Facebook pages that purport to be independent but exclusively promote content from The Daily Wire in a coordinated fashion.”

As a result, conservatives’ voices are the loudest on Facebook. According to an investigation put together last year by David Uberti for Vice, the Fox News Facebook page had a higher engagement rate (the average number of engagements per post per follower) than that of any other major news organization over the same period, and some five times that of the New York Times.

Along with the uninformed and the misinformed, we thus have, among the latter, the disinfomed – a word that should exist if it doesn’t yet. According to McKay Coppins in a recent article in the Atlantic,

In conversations with political strategists and other experts, a dystopian picture of the general election comes into view – one shaped by coordinated bot attacks, Potemkin local-news sites, micro-targeted fearmongering, and anonymous mass texting ... The Trump campaign is planning to spend more than $1 billion, and it will be aided by a vast coalition of partisan media, outside political groups, and enterprising freelance operatives. These pro-Trump forces are poised to wage what could be the most extensive disinformation campaign in U.S. history ... The wreckage it leaves behind could be irreparable.

Along with the uninformed and the misinformed, we have, among the latter, the disinfomed – a word that should exist if it doesn’t yet.
In the academic literature, three concepts have emerged seeking to make sense of the Trumpite phenomenon. The most common is populism, which is in fact not an “ism,” since it has no programmatic content beyond seeking to keep outsiders out of the country and identifying with the interests of the native-born and against elites siding with outsiders against “the people.” There has been a significant recent increase in interest among academics in the spread of populism. Below is an excerpt from the call for papers to the September 2019 American Political Science Association meeting, a call which drew scores of papers, something inconceivable at earlier similar meetings:

No recent political development has been more striking than the rise to power of self-identified populist movements around the globe, whose main unifying trait is their claim to champion “the people” against entrenched selfish “elites.” These movements display differences that have sparked debates over which, if any, should be called “populist”; how they compare with past “populisms”; and what “populism” is. The current partisans, often labeled populist, have more often been on the right than the left, including anti-immigrant, anti-globalization, ardently nationalist parties such as Fidesz in Hungary; the Law and Justice Party in Poland; and the Trump Republicans in the United States.

While in most democratic countries populists have formed new parties, in the context of the rigid U.S. two-party system, they instead moved to take over the Republican Party, mobilizing enough registered Republicans to deny renomination to insufficiently loyal legislators.

The term populist does not fully capture this intensity of feeling and one-sided perception of reality. An alternative that has been suggested is tribalism. This is a form of emotional identification that transcends ideology, which the Trumpites have manifested in casually jettisoning Republican orthodoxy on trade, entitlements, international alliances, the FBI and other matters. The attitude of dedicated followers of sports teams, for whom all calls by the referee not favouring their team are evidence of bias, is often described as tribal. In such cases, tribalism is usually — though not always — harmless. Tribalism in politics, however, is not harmless. In a 2019 article, Jonathan Rauch analyzed the changing nature of American partisanship:

What we fear, we tend also to hate ... Partisans are not so much rallying for a cause or party they believe in as banding together to fight a collective enemy — psychologically and politically a very different kind of proposition ... Fans of opposing political parties perceive different facts and take different policy views depending on which party lines up on which side. Presenting people with facts that challenge an identity- or group-defining opinion does not work ... Both academic research and real-world politics over the past few years suggest that a purely political or ideological account of polarization is incomplete. We are up against a kind of tribalism here
that is deeper and tougher than we had imagined.\footnote{9}

Another relevant concept is that of \textit{cult}. Congressman Joe Walsh was quoted by Guardian reporter David Smith at the Iowa caucuses on February 2:

\textit{My party is a cult. I’m a conservative Republican; Fox News won’t have me on. Conservative media will ignore me because they’re a cult with Trump. The Republican parties in each state: they are a cult for Trump ...} Every time I’m out there talking primarily to Republican voters, because that’s what I’m trying to do, there are a lot of Republicans that get angry at me and we get threats every day and it can get ugly.

Similarly, in a column on January 10 in the Los Angeles Times, Virginia Heffernan concluded that “the Trump cult will define American politics for decades to come, even after its dear leader is gone.” She cited “Steven Hassan, an expert in cults and an ex-Moonie [who] published ‘The Cult of Trump’ ... When polled, far too many Republicans come across as lost to paranoia [with] and factually unmoored talking points, just the way Hassan was lost to Sun Myung Moon [having undergone] a ‘radical personal change.’” Heffernan added,

\textit{Journalists Luke O’Neil and Edwin Lyngar, as well as Jen Senko in \textit{“The Brainwashing of My Dad,” have compiled stories of Americans who have gone over}. O’Neil summarized the transformation this way: “A loved one ... sat down in front of Fox News, found}

some kind of deep, addictive comfort in the anger and paranoia, and became a different person.”

To sum up, there is something new and disquieting taking place in modern Western democratic societies, especially the United States. To what extent this is reminiscent of Germany, Italy and Spain in the 1930s, I will leave to historians. But having watched Republican legislators succumb to threats from the Trumpite cult, one needs to be concerned. It is fair to expect that were Trump to be reelected, he would use every bit of his power to wreak vengeance on his opponents, unleashing his supporters to report insufficiently loyal government employees and attack his critics in the media – hopefully only online.

There is something new and disquieting taking place in modern Western democratic societies, especially the United States. To what extent this is reminiscent of Germany, Italy and Spain in the 1930s, I will leave to historians. But having watched Republican legislators succumb to threats from the Trumpite cult, one needs to be concerned.
As of this writing, the effective nomination of Joe Biden and the economic effects of the coronavirus have reduced the chances of Trump winning the presidency and Republicans controlling Congress. Yet this will be an election like no other. Trump knows that it is only the presidency that is keeping him from bankruptcy – his hotels no longer propped up by courtiers – and probably jail.

Yet nothing is certain. How, if one is used to waging a campaign against another party, does one wage a campaign against a cult?

The best prospect is that Trump will lose the election decisively and leave the scene without shouting too loud about having been cheated and thus giving rise to violent reactions among the Trumpites. But even so, given the skewed American political institutions and polarized media, the Trumpian world will remain after he is gone.

But the longer term is cloudier. While in the current medical emergency the populist attack on expertise has lost some of its appeal even in the United States, the Trumpite base isn’t going anywhere. In power, Democrats will be saddled with a huge national and international economic challenge, with levels of debt higher than anyone can remember. And they will have to make hard choices in the face of inevitable hardships. Unless the emerging generation has learned its lessons, we can expect that, probably sooner rather than later, the next wave of Trumpites will sweep our neighbours to the south.

Notes

4 Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope, “Does Party Trump Ideology? Disentangling Party and Ideology in America?” American Political Science Review, Vol. 113, No. 1 (2018), pp. 38–54. The questions were: number of years served by a senator; name of the current Secretary of Energy, from four possibilities; which party is more conservative on the issue of health care; which party currently controls the House of Representatives; and on which of four different programs the federal government spends the least.
7 Christopher Wylie, Mindf*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America (New York: Random House, 2020).
Something is rotten in the state of India

An election in Delhi, a ghost in Denmark, and a school in Bangladesh

By John Richards

In February of this year, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) won its third mandate to govern the Indian state of Delhi, comprising the city of that name and its immediate surroundings. The AAP is a maverick political party born in the wake of a decade-old anticorruption campaign. To the surprise of many, it defeated the Hindu nationalist anti-Muslim campaign waged during the election campaign by the BJP, Narendra Modi’s governing national party. Survival of the AAP government is more than a regional election in a (relatively) minor state with a population of 20 million; potentially, it is a major event in Indian politics. But first, a digression on *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in the tradition of the unreliable narrator. For four centuries, people have debated what he intended as the “something rotten” in Denmark to which the guard Marcellus alerts Horatio after the appearance of the Ghost of Hamlet’s father. In the next scene the Ghost denounces his brother Claudius who has usurped the throne:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts –
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce! – won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen:
O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!
One interpretation of rot in the state of India is that Modi is a “beast” who has “seduced” the “seeming-virtuous” people of India. What a falling-off was there from religious tolerance as preached by Gandhi, now abandoned by the Hindu majority, who are indulging a “shameful lust” that entails persecution of Muslims. The rightful king of India (whoever is the present leader of the Congress Party) has been assassinated – literally in the case of Rajiv Gandhi (killed in 1991), figuratively at other times.

More or less, this is the interpretation of Indian politics among cosmopolitan liberals. A good example is Asim Ali, writing in the New York Times under the headline “Modi lost the Delhi Election. It Doesn’t Matter.” Why doesn’t it matter? Because Modi’s Hindutva and intolerance of Muslims define the present state of Indian politics. The fact that the Delhi election winner chose not to challenge Modi’s discriminatory citizenship law and instead campaigned on quality of public services is proof that Modi has won the ideological debate over religious tolerance.

Shakespeare’s villains are never one-dimensional. Claudius may have assassinated Prince Hamlet’s father and usurped the throne, but he is portrayed throughout the play as a competent ruler. Perhaps Hamlet’s father (the assassinated king) and the usurper Claudius are both rotten. Shakespeare lived in the 16th and early 17th centuries, a time of religious wars across Europe, which resulted in multiple acts of regicide in a context of rampant papal corruption. The usurper was usually neither better nor worse than the usurped. In 20th- and early 21st-century India, Congress tolerated political corruption on such a massive scale and for so many decades that a plurality of Indians have become as disgusted with it as 16th- and 17th-century Protestant Europeans were with the papacy. Apparently Indians are willing to be governed, at the national level, by the BJP, which may – or may not – govern the country more efficiently. Worth noting, the AAP not only defeated the BJP’s attempt to mould the Delhi election into an affirmation of Hindutva and opposition to Islam, but also decimated the Congress. Of 70 seats in the Delhi legislature, the AAP won 62, the BJP 8 and Congress 0. For many, the BJP’s introduction of a discriminatory citizenship law that grants citizenship to all religious refugees other than Muslims is a minor matter relative to the abysmal state of public services in much of India.

A government focused on public services

Soutik Biswas, the BBC correspondent in India, interprets the AAP victory much as I do. In one of several stories he wrote on the AAP reelection, he summarized: “Rather than being seen as a vote against the BJP, [AAP leader Arvind] Kejriwal’s comfortable win owes more to the triumph of welfarism and effective governance – revamping state-run schools and health clinics, and providing cheap water and electricity.”

Asim Ali acknowledged that “Mr. Kejriwal, an anti-graft activist turned politician, focused the electoral campaign of his party on his record of governance – the significant
For many, the BJP’s introduction of a discriminatory citizenship law that grants citizenship to all religious refugees other than Muslims is a minor matter relative to the abysmal state of public services in much of India. Improvement he made to the delivery of services in public hospitals, the quality of education and infrastructure in schools, and the cost of electricity in Delhi.” Nonetheless, the victory “doesn’t matter” because the rot in India is simple: it is Hindutva and hostility to Islam. As an aside, Ali would be more convincing in affirming that the rot in India is primarily religious bigotry if he generalized his thesis to include criticism of Pakistan and – with more qualifications – Bangladesh.

Biswa and Ali agree on one thing: the AAP is a party led by earnest middle-class professionals primarily interested in better social services. Kejriwal is a former accountant. Atishi, the most prominent AAP spokesperson on behalf of better government schools, has a degree from Oxford. If readers want a Canadian parallel, the 1944–64 Saskatchewan government of Tommy Douglas and his successor Woodrow Lloyd (minister of education for 17 years before becoming premier and successfully implementing medicare) comes to mind. It was an earnest government led primarily by a charismatic preacher and several very smart teachers and farmers. For two decades it pioneered multiple social programs that were adopted across Canada in the 1960s. The progressive movement in the United States prior to World War I, largely motivated by middle-class disgust with the post–Civil War era of corrupt Tammany Hall politics, is another parallel.

The heart of the AAP’s *raison d’ètre* is better schools. The AAP has spent much more on schools than its predecessors but, more important, most of its senior leaders are obsessive about improving and decentralizing school management, empowering teachers as professionals and assessing school outcomes. In 2019, AAP leaders trumpeted the result, unthinkable a decade earlier, that students...
in Delhi government secondary schools were marginally ahead of the average performance in Delhi private schools.

The AAP victory over the BJP and Congress is encouraging, but its breach in conventional Indian politics is fragile. There is little evidence that the major political parties are willing to undertake self-criticism and constrain, if not eliminate, the complex web of corruption, patronage and electoral intimidation that has characterized politics in the subcontinent for the last half-century. The result of weak governance has been a shamefully weak set of social programs, especially with regard to schools.

The “shameful history” of Indian government schools

In the century before India became independent in 1947, several commissions assessed the daunting task of organizing universal education in the subcontinent. The last initiative prior to independence was the Sargent Committee in 1944. It recommended an agenda stretching over four decades:

- free and compulsory basic education of five years for all children aged 6 to 11, to be realized within four decades;
- compulsory senior basic education of three years for four-fifths of the children aged 11 to 14;
- secondary education, with a duration of six years, for the age group 11–17 for approximately one out of every five children who completed the primary school.

At the time, adult literacy was 18 per cent and only a quarter of school-age children were attending a school. Post-independence, Indian political leaders scorned the committee’s four-decade timetable. The first Five Year Plan reduced the time for realizing the committee’s first goal from four decades to one.

Far from achieving universal basic education in one decade, India proved the Sargent Committee’s timetable wildly overoptimistic. Seven decades after independence, the Lok Sabha (national parliament) continues to enact legislation and set ambitious targets – which it consistently fails to meet. The most recent major legislative initiative, the 2009 Right to Education Act, stipulates a right to “free and compulsory” education for children aged 6 to 14. In great detail, Rangachar Govinda and A. Mathew discuss the laws, commissions and five-year plans from the 1940s to the present. They reach the depressing conclusion that “through the decades ... political leaders set specific targets and time frames ... but these remained unmet every time.” This conclusion is shared by nearly all who have studied education policy in South Asia.

Following the launch of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals in 2000, India and other South Asian countries responded with improvements in school inputs: more teachers (which allowed for reductions in student/teacher ratios), school improvements (such as toilets, books, electricity) and higher teacher salaries. India, Bangladesh and Nepal claim to have more or less fulfilled the “letter” of MDG2 – universal primary education by 2015 – but they did not fulfil its “spirit.” Enrolment of the primary-age cohort is now
over 90 per cent in India and Bangladesh (but not Pakistan), and primary completion rates are about 80 per cent. However, “free and compulsory” education has not led to a better-educated young generation. Governments achieved high completion rates by lowering standards in government schools. In general, the quality of Indian primary education in government schools remains shamefully low.

How low? An indirect measure is the flight from government schools among those with some discretionary income. In the most recent survey by the Indian nongovernmental organization ASER (see box above) in 2018, the share of sampled children attending government primary schools has declined to 64 per cent. In other words, more than a third of all rural children now attend a nongovernment school. In the cities the share is probably higher.

A key ASER benchmark is the share of sampled Grade 3 students “working at grade
Sources: 2018 ASER survey of rural India; 2020 Bluebell survey.

**FIGURE 1: PERCENT OF SAMPLED STUDENTS ABLE TO READ STORY, BY GRADE**

- Bluebell
- India
- West Bengal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
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<td>23.5</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>50.7</td>
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**FIGURE 1: PERCENT OF SAMPLED STUDENTS ABLE TO PERFORM SUBTRACTION, BY GRADE**

- Bluebell
- India
- West Bengal

<table>
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<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
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<td>14.4</td>
<td>28.1</td>
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<td>52.3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>25.9</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: 2018 ASER survey of rural India; 2020 Bluebell survey.
level.” Nationally, the average is 27 per cent in terms of reading, and 28 per cent in arithmetic. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate progress through the five elementary grades in terms of ability to undertake the reading and arithmetic problems drawn from the Grade 2 curriculum of the relevant state. The ASER statistics illustrated are the national average for all school types. (For reasons explained below I have added the analogous average progress for West Bengal students and for an NGO school in northern Bangladesh.) There is a very large difference between average performance in government relative to nongovernment schools. Among Grade 3 students in government schools, only 21 per cent are reading at grade level, as opposed to 41 per cent in nongovernment schools. With respect to arithmetic, the comparable statistics are 21 per cent in government schools and 44 per cent in nongovernment schools.

There are many qualifications to make, but they do not seriously blunt the conclusion: government primary education in India is, as my colleagues and I concluded in an earlier Inroads article, a “shameful failure.” Some of the gap between government and nongovernment student assessments can be attributed to differences in family characteristics. Parents of children in nongovernment schools have higher incomes on average and, more important, are more likely to be literate. Having a literate parent is the most important family determinant of whether children achieve literacy as adults. Also, while average outcomes in nongovernment schools are dramatically better than in government schools, there is much variance among nongovernment schools. For example, Bangladesh national assessments indicate that madrassa students perform below the level of students in government schools.

**An NGO school in northern Bangladesh**

I am one of several Canadian volunteers who have supported an NGO school adjacent to a “cluster village” in Nilphamari, a remote district in northern Bangladesh close to the Indian border. Cluster villages are a form of social housing in Bangladesh for families of rural labourers who own no land. The nearest government primary school is at a distance of several kilometres. The NGO school began six years ago in an old building with one classroom that, in a squeeze, accommodated 50 students and a second that accommodated 10 students sitting elbow to elbow around one large table in the middle of the room. Enrolment rose, so we operated morning and afternoon shifts. In 2018, we decided to build a new school with five classrooms, a latrine, a teachers’ room and a dedicated recreational area. Someone – I don’t remember who – decided to call it Bluebell.

In February 2020, we organized an in-home survey using the ASER protocol to assess basic reading and arithmetic. The sample included 57 children from the cluster village in grades 1–5, roughly two thirds of present enrolment in the school. (The survey found a small number of children who attended a government school. Their performance was very weak.) The sample is minute relative to the large ASER surveys conducted in India. Its primary value is feedback to Bluebell teachers.
on student progress. And yet, despite being a sample of one small school, perhaps there are tentative conclusions to draw from the school as a case study.

To begin, the relationship between Bangladesh and the adjacent Indian state of West Bengal is somewhat similar to that between Wallonia and France: separate countries with the same language and many shared cultural references. At least in the early primary grades, West Bengal dominates India’s national reading results; for the final two grades the regional and national results converge. In reading, Bluebell’s performance clearly outpaces the outcomes in West Bengal and India overall, in all grades. In arithmetic there are inversions: West Bengal and Indian students overall outperform Bluebell in Grades 1 and 2; West Bengal and Bluebell are essentially equal in Grade 3; and Bluebell students progress more quickly in Grades 4 and 5 than do students in West Bengal or India overall.

Why are Bluebell students faring better than the average student in West Bengal?

On average, children in nongovernment schools in India come from families with higher incomes than children in government schools, and that partly explains the superior nongovernment outcomes in ASER surveys. That cannot be the explanation here. The majority of children in our sample live in families where neither parent can read. There is also no doubt that family incomes in our sample are below the average in West Bengal.7

The NGO school has benefited from consistent donations by Canadian volunteers, which have enabled hiring an appropriate number of teachers. With five teachers for the 85 students in the primary school, there is an attractive student:teacher ratio of 1:17.8 Nevertheless, it is hard to make a case for generous foreign donations as the explanation. The NGO pays teachers at only half the level of government primary teachers. Hence, annual Bluebell per-pupil costs, including overhead costs, are under US$200 – which is roughly 25 per cent below comparable government spending per primary school student.

If pressed to explain Bluebell’s relative performance, I resort to the old saying among education administrators: “The three most important factors in any school are teachers, teachers and teachers; everything else is minor.” Bluebell has benefited from its ability to attract teachers motivated to teach. The NGO leadership of Bluebell has tried to follow the Bangladesh school curriculum while treating teachers as professionals. Bluebell should not rest on its achievement. It has outperformed ASER’s West Bengal statistics, but the ASER reading and arithmetic thresholds are hardly demanding. A good school is more than ASER expectations.

If pressed to explain Bluebell’s relative performance, I resort to the old saying among education administrators: “The three most important factors in any school are teachers, teachers and teachers; everything else is minor.”
To conclude, if the BBC Delhi correspondent and I are right in our interpretation of what is “rotten in the state of India,” and if electorates in the rest of South Asia want to replicate AAP outcomes – both assumptions are debatable – citizens must tackle the ongoing damage wrought by conventional politicians.

Notes

3 Much of this section is drawn from a forthcoming book on schools in South Asia. The authors include John Richards, Manzoor Ahmed and Mohammad Shahidur Islam.
6 A summary of the survey is accessible at the description of Bluebell on the website of Oasis for Prosperity, https://ofp.ngo/causes/
7 The majority of sampled families assessed their food security as the lowest of four categories (“always in deficit with respect to income for food”). All but one of the remaining families chose the second lowest (“sometimes in deficit with respect to income for food”).
8 A sixth teacher is in charge of a separate preschool.
British Labour’s safe pair of hands

The choice of Keir Starmer as leader heralds an end to Corbyn-era volatility

By Eric Shaw

Eric Shaw, currently Honorary Research Fellow, has written extensively on all aspects of the British Labour Party. His most recent book, written with Gerry Hassan, is *The People’s Flag and the Union Jack: An Alternative History of Britain and the Labour Party.*

In 2015 an earthquake occurred within the British Labour Party when, against all expectations, its members elected Jeremy Corbyn, a representative of its previously marginal radical left, as its leader.1 And in doing so, they provided him with a handsome majority over his opponents.

Many within the party’s rank and file were delighted and exhilarated, but most of its MPs were aghast. Indeed, after a failed bid in 2016 to eject him, the parliamentary Labour Party was only grudgingly reconciled to Corbyn as leader. The following year, in 2017, the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, sensing an opportunity to crush a Labour Party lagging well behind her in the opinion polls, called an election. To widespread amazement, Labour polled well, gaining more than 30 seats and depriving the Conservatives of their overall majority. Corbyn’s control of the party was, at last, consolidated.

But not for long. Two years later, in December 2019, yet another election was called, this time by the new and popular Tory leader Boris Johnson. The Tories won with a massive 80-seat majority, with Labour reduced to fewer seats than at any time since 1935. Corbyn had no option but to resign.

In the subsequent leadership contest, three candidates secured the requisite number of nominations to enable them to stand. Rebecca Long-Bailey, the shadow business secretary, was the “continuity candidate” from the Corbyn camp. The other two candidates, shadow Brexit secretary Sir Keir Starmer and Lisa Nandy MP, were from Labour’s “soft
Interestingly, there were no candidates from the centre-right. The election, which took place in early April, resulted in a very decisive endorsement for Keir Starmer (table 1).

**TABLE 1: LABOUR LEADERSHIP ELECTION, APRIL 2020**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CANDIDATE</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
<th>POPULAR VOTE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keir Starmer</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>275,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Long-Bailey</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>135,218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Nandy</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>79,597</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Starmer’s percentage of the poll was roughly equal to that obtained by Corbyn in 2015. Long-Bailey, in contrast, secured only half the vote won by Corbyn less than five years previously. Starmer won primarily because he was seen by dispirited and demoralized party members as a much more credible, competent and electorally appealing leader than the somewhat lacklustre Long-Bailey.

So who is Keir Starmer? In his accent, demeanour and manner he seems very much a scion of the British professional middle class. In fact, his staunchly Labour father was a skilled factory worker and his mother a nurse, and he was the first member of his family to go to university (Leeds). Elected to Parliament only in 2015, he has had relatively little political experience, but prior to 2015 had established a formidable reputation outside Parliament. A barrister in high repute, he was made a Queen’s Counsel (QC) in 2002, and became joint head of Doughty Street Chambers (where celebrated human rights barrister Amal Clooney was a colleague) specializing in human rights cases. In 2008, he was appointed to one of the most senior judicial positions in the country, Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), remaining in that post until 2013. In 2014 he received a knighthood for services to law and criminal justice. Those who worked with him attest to his integrity, meticulous attention to detail, stamina and keen forensic skills.

In 2016, a year after his election to Parliament, Starmer joined the shadow cabinet in the crucial post of shadow Brexit secretary. He played a key role in the process of hammering out a policy on Brexit, the issue that completely dominated British politics from 2016 until the 2019 general election. Securing an agreed position on Brexit proved tortuous and protracted because Labour was hopelessly divided three ways: between the Eurosceptic inner Corbyn circle, dominated by longstanding opponents of European integration who deemed the European Union a “capitalist club”; ardent Remainers drawing support from across Labour’s left-right spectrum, including the radical left; and Leavers, mainly on Labour’s right, who feared – rightly as it
transpired – the loss of many pro-Leave working class seats if Labour was seen to prevaricate on Brexit.

Starmer, a firm Remainer, helped steer the party to a compromise position, which unfortunately satisfied few either in the party or among the voters. Notwithstanding, Starmer had enhanced his standing within the party with his capacity to master complex briefs, as well as his diligence, his fluency and, not least, his ability to think on his feet – unlike his predecessor. Admittedly, he lacked oratorical flair and inspirational qualities but, exuding soundness and solid good sense, he had a reputation as a “safe pair of hands”: a relief after the volatility of Corbyn’s leadership. Though associated with the soft left, he appealed also to the right and to prominent members of the radical left as well.

The implications of Starmer’s triumph for Labour’s future programmatic direction are, as yet, unclear. Surprisingly little is known about his political beliefs. For virtually all his life as an MP he served on the front bench, which meant he was bound by the conventions of collective responsibility and thus discouraged from articulating his views outside his own brief. So, while from his career as a human rights lawyer we know much about his views on matters of civil liberty and criminal justice, we have few insights into his thinking on social and economic policy. During the leadership election contest, Starmer endorsed the party’s radical left wing’s 2019 election manifesto, but this may have been for tactical reasons. Under Starmer, we can expect a gradual disengagement from some of its controversial planks, such as its ambitious nationalization program.

While from Starmer’s career as a human rights lawyer we know much about his views on matters of civil liberty and criminal justice, we have few insights into his thinking on social and economic policy.

There will also be shifts in foreign policy. Corbyn had a long record as an unsparing, vehement and highly vocal critic of “American imperialism” and the Atlantic alliance, and was an enthusiastic advocate of “progressive” and “anti-imperialist” movements in Latin America and the Middle East (notably Palestinian organizations). Most controversially, he rejected the longstanding principle that the axiomatic basis of British foreign policy should be a close relationship with the United States. While Starmer will have little time for Donald Trump, it is highly likely that he will adopt a more pragmatic, considered and nuanced approach to international matters. He will avoid the persistent and truculent anti-Americanism and often uncritical zeal for “liberation movements” of his predecessor.

Lisa Nandy’s unexpected appointment as shadow foreign secretary, a reward for her impressive performance as leadership candidate, is worth noting here. Her positions on foreign policy issues are likely to be closely aligned with Starmer’s. She has firmly disassociated Labour from Corbyn’s rather indulgent attitude toward Vladimir Putin, commenting acerbically...
that under his leadership “we stood with the Russian government, and not with the people it oppresses.” She is a longstanding advocate for Palestinian rights, and has condemned arms sales to Israel, the Gaza blockade and the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories. However, she also firmly defends Israel’s right to exist and was a tough critic of Corbyn’s failure to come to grips with anti-Semitism. It is an encouraging indication of her diplomatic skills that, while serving as chair of Labour Friends of Palestine, she received the nomination for the Labour leadership of the very pro-Israel Jewish Labour Movement.

Her only point of difference with the new leader is over Europe, where she opposed a second referendum and called for acceptance of Brexit – which might prove useful in Labour’s efforts to regain Leave voters. As noted, Starmer is pro-European and will certainly be keener to work with social democratic parties in the EU than Corbyn. However, on the issue of Brexit, his inclination will be to accept the fait accompli of the 2019 election, won by the Tories on a cast-iron commitment to quit the European Union. Transitional arrangements for the U.K.’s final departure from the EU are due to be concluded at the end of this year. Few regard this as plausible given the pandemic, but the government has reiterated its determination to meet the deadline. Starmer will urge agreement to an extension but will not campaign for a reappraisal of Britain’s exit from the EU.

On one issue Stammer was quick to make a clean break with his predecessor: the highly controversial, divisive – indeed toxic – question of anti-Semitism in the party. Many on the radical left insisted that the incidence of anti-Semitism in Labour’s ranks had been grossly exaggerated as a device to smear Corbyn. Whatever the truth, this plainly is not the view Starmer takes. One of his first pronouncements as leader was to denounce “the disgrace of anti-Semitism in our party” and to acknowledge that under Corbyn “we have failed the Jewish community.” He has pledged to “tear out this poison by its roots,” a declaration very well received in the Jewish community.6

A successful leader must be an effective and astute party manager. As party managers,
leaders have two major priorities: to bolster their power base and to promote party unity. Given the intense polarization, rancorous atmosphere and hyperfactionalism bequeathed by the Corbyn era, neither task will be easy. The new leader inherited a party in which the key centre of institutional power, Labour’s powerful National Executive Committee (NEC), was under the mastery of the radical left. This mattered because the NEC has responsibilities for party policy formulation, organization, rule application, finance and personnel – including the appointment of senior party officials.

A combination of byelections and the use of the leader’s powers of appointment has already changed the political complexion of the NEC in Starmer’s favour, and radical left representation is likely to dwindle further. Starmer also enjoys solid support in other major party institutions: the affiliated trade unions, the constituency parties and (overwhelmingly) the caucus. We can expect substantial personnel changes in Labour’s Head Office as the pro-Corbyn apparatus is dismantled. An early indicator of the marginalization of the radical left is its meagre representation of three members (out of a total of 27) in Starmer’s reshuffled shadow cabinet.

Corbyn was not by nature a consensual leader and was disinclined to put much effort into conciliating those opposed to him. Starmer’s managerial style will be different. As his role in negotiating Brexit policy illustrated, he prefers to organize consent through bargaining, accommodation, dialogue and inclusivity. A clue to Starmer’s preferred style can be found in his response when asked which Labour leader over the last half-century he most admired. He cited the wily and adroit Harold Wilson (who was Prime Minister at the time of the divisive 1975 referendum on membership in what was then the European Economic Community), explaining that he respected Wilson for the way he “actually managed to hold bits of the party together ... he was spinning plates left, right and centre, but he actually steered through it pretty well.”7

“Spinning plates left, right and centre” is not easy: Wilson complained how he used to have to “wade in shit” to construct compromises over contentious issues. Equally, it is unclear how much the radical left will reciprocate. There were always tensions within its ranks between the hardliners and the more pragmatically inclined, and these have recently been inflamed. Pragmatists include the defeated leadership candidate and now shadow education secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey. But the more intransigent elements are probably the majority.

One of Starmer’s first pronouncements as leader was to denounce “the disgrace of anti-Semitism in our party” and to acknowledge that under Corbyn “we have failed the Jewish community.”
Virtual Prime Minister’s Questions on April 22, 2020, with First Secretary of State Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP and the Leader of the Opposition Sir Keir Starmer MP. PHOTO VIA FLICKR: UK PARLIAMENT / JESSICA TAYLOR
Despite the coronavirus crisis, there has already been a drumbeat of discontent and denunciations from radical left websites berating the new leader for a range of failings: his role in pushing for a second referendum on the EU (and hence, it is claimed, for “losing the election”), his supposedly antiliberal record as Director of Public Prosecutions and his willingness to accept donations for his leadership campaign from the “Israel lobby.” These more unyielding radical leftists see their priority as developing extraparliamentary networks of power to mobilize resistance to Starmer. But such a strategy is likely to be counterproductive given the deep desire for party unity: the resumption of factionalism and tirades against the new leader will be deeply resented.

Starmer’s sweeping leadership triumph has conferred a strong mandate upon him and considerable discretion in how to resuscitate the party. But he faces a Herculean task given the serious shrinkage in Labour’s vote last December. Some on the soft left (such as the pressure group Compass) have suggested that the way forward is for Labour to form a “progressive majority” with the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, and to campaign for a more proportional electoral system. But Starmer is unlikely to follow this advice as he will be aware that neither a “progressive majority” nor electoral reform appeal much beyond the liberal middle class.

The fact is that Labour’s vote has been most seriously depleted with the hemorrhaging of white working-class support, especially in its former heartlands in the north and Midlands of England (not to mention mass desertions to the Scottish National Party in Scotland). Here Labour has been the casualty of two interlinked deep-seated sociocultural trends by no means confined to the U.K. The first is the increasing political salience of a value-based liberal/authoritarian cleavage, which has cut across traditional left/right and class-based divisions. Correlating closely with the Remain/Leave split, its starkest political manifestation is the flight of many Leave-supporting working-class voters from Labour to the Tories in the recent election.

The second trend is the ideological reconstitution of notions of the “elite” to refer not to the holders of wealth, power and privilege but to possessors of cultural capital – the so-called “liberal metropolitan elite,” of which Starmer appears a quintessential member. This mode of discourse has enabled the immensely wealthy global media corporations (such as the Murdoch empire), which control most of the U.K. press, to pose as the champions of “ordinary people” struggling against Labour’s “liberal elite.” For Starmer, a priority must be to reframe the terms of this debate, contesting the Tory argument that the most effective way the so-called “left behinds” can
For Starmer, a priority must be to contest the Tory argument that the most effective way the so-called “left behinds” can assert themselves is by voting for the party of the rich and privileged. Starmer’s task is to revive Labour’s tradition as the party of “the common people” without sliding into the outmoded rhetoric of the class struggle.

At the time of writing (April 2020) everything political is eclipsed by the coronavirus. As Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s former director of communications, recently wrote, the COVID-19 pandemic has had the unfortunate effect of depriving Starmer of the opportunity he would otherwise have had to “establish himself firmly in the national conversation.” But equally, Campbell added, the crisis plays to his strengths as a “forensic, consensus-seeking [leader who] has a strong grasp of detail.”

Which effect will be the weightier is, at present, impossible to judge.

NOTES

1 I use the terms radical left and Corbyn left interchangeably.

2 Soft left is a rather vague and ill-defined term for a wide spectrum of opinion located between the centre and right of the party on one end and the radical left on the other. Its members often differ over specific issues, but agree in stressing the importance of consensus-building in the party.


4 For example, the two high-profile campaigning journalists George Monbiot and Paul Mason.


9 See, e.g., Daniel Finn. “Jeremy Corbyn Showed the Way. but We Must Learn the Right Lessons,” Jacobin, April 3, 2020, retrieved from https://jacobinmag.com/2020/04/jeremy-corbyn-labour-party-miliband-thatcher-blair-keir-starmer

What is a nation?

Divergent interpretations from Scandinavia and beyond

By Thomas Lundén

Thomas Lundén is emeritus professor in human geography specializing in ethnic and political geography at Södertörn University in the Stockholm suburb of Flemingsberg, Sweden. An earlier and different version of this paper was published in Baltic Worlds, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2019), pp. 13–18.

Jerzy Einhorn (1925–2000), later to become famous as a professor of medicine and politician, arrived in Sweden from Poland in 1946. Asked for his nationality during his interrogation by the immigration police, he answered, “Jewish.” “There is no such nationality,” said the immigration officer. Einhorn comments, “He does not understand that, during all my years, I have not been allowed to be [called] Polish, and that [now] he is the one who is right.”

Einhorn’s bewilderment was understandable, arising naturally out of the semantic confusion about the idea of nationality and the related concepts of ethnic identity and group belonging, as expressed in the different political cultures of Europe. Einhorn’s belief that his nationality was Jewish would find support in the Swedish National Encyclopedia, which says, “Basically, the concept of ‘nation’ does not relate to states but to the concept of ‘people,’ i.e. individuals knit together by a common identity.” Yet today it is common, especially in Scandinavia, to speak of the nation-state. With Brexit and divisions along national lines looming in Europe and beyond, this is a concept to which we need return.

Until 1871 there was no German state but a number of smaller entities, “united” by a common feeling of German nationality. In what was later to become Italy, as well as in a Poland long divided and suppressed by three colonizing powers (Habsburg Austria, Tsarist Russia...
and Prussia), nationalism aimed at forming a territorial state built on the idea of a common nation: an expression of cultural homogeneity.

The clearest expression of state nationalism was in France. The 1789 revolution centralized an earlier conglomerate of languages and cultures (Provençal, Breton, Flemish, etc.) into a homogeneous entity through forced assimilation into a unitary French culture and language. Today, France still denies the existence of national minorities: “We are all French.” Bretons and Basques are treated as mere curiosities, their languages as “patois,” local dialects.

Groups with cross-border ethnic links – Corsicans, Catalans, Flemings and German speakers in Alsace and Lorraine – have been pressured to ignore beckonings from neighbouring “kin-nation” countries, related to them ethnically or historically. Such links can lead to claims on neighbouring territories as irredenta or “not yet redeemed.” Fascist Italy claimed Corsica, Swiss Ticino and other areas of alleged Italian ethnicity and culture. In contrast, state-nationalist France has refrained from making any claims on French-speaking Switzerland, Walloon Belgium or the Vallée d’Aoste in Italy.

To complicate the linguistic bewilderment regarding nationality, former British colonies in North America formed an independent federation, the units of which were called states, while the entire territory, the United States of America, was called the nation. The semantic hegemony of American English has unfortunately led to the increasing tendency in other languages, including Swedish and German, to apply the concept of nation-state even to multinational territorial states such as Belgium and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As a consequence, the concept of national minority has been blurred. If the terms nation and state are understood to be distinct, a national minority consists of a population within a state whose members regard themselves as not belonging to the state-forming nation, In some cases, such as Hungarians in Romania, this population belongs to another state-forming nationality; in others, such as the Kurds, the Sámi or Canada’s First Nations, it forms a stateless nation. In states based on immigrant assimilation, such as France and the U.S., the protection of national minorities has often been misunderstood. In the first decades of the United Nations (sic!) the United States (sic!) sought to help national minorities assimilate into the majority population. Eleanor Roosevelt, who led the UN Commission for the protection of national minorities, never understood that most European minorities sought protection against forced cultural and linguistic assimilation by the nationalizing states.3
The United Nations is in fact a grouping of states. But its predecessor, the League of Nations, was built on Woodrow Wilson’s dream of every people’s right to form a state of its own: a nation-state. At Versailles in 1919, the conglomerate states of Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany (with its Polish, Danish and French-minded minorities) were divided or truncated according to ethnic principles, often after plebiscites, even though the resulting borders led to large national minorities in the new states – often oppressed in turn by the new ruling majorities.

At the same time, the victorious Western powers could continue along the path of ethnic assimilation. The French model of national homogenization through a policy of assimilation was followed in Norway and Sweden. Denmark gained an “ethnic irredenta,” Northern Schleswig, in a plebiscite in 1920, while its territorially detached Atlantic areas of Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, with their respective linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, won autonomy – and, in the case of Iceland, independence. Finland, with relative success, created a nation consisting of two linguistic communities, accepting a League of Nations decision of limited autonomy for the Åland Islands, whose population in an unofficial referendum had opted for Sweden.

State and cultural nationalism

Other European nationalizing states have been harsher, particularly when it comes to eradicating local languages and cultures. Hungary today deplores the loss of ethnic irredenta after 1918, but its radical “Magyarization” of non-ethnic Hungarians before World War I is rarely mentioned. In Turkey the existence of a considerable Kurdish minority has until recently been denied, and it is still forbidden to call that minority a nation. Like Turkey, Greece only accepts the existence of minorities legally defined in treaties (the mainly Turkish Muslim minority in Western Thrace) but denies rights to its Albanian and Slavo-Macedonian groups, their numbers heavily reduced by assimilation and emigration. Spain officially denies the existence of a Catalan nation, though it recognizes the right to autonomy for its “nationalities and regions.”

When associated with a state, nationalism is relatively easy to identify. But cultural nationalism is different – related as it is to feelings of identity that are changeable and multidimensional – and can be spurred by popular (or populist) movements. A useful discussion of the concept is found in the work of the conservative Swedish activist and political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922) in Staten som lifsform (The State as a Form of Life), published in 1916. Lacking a state with
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its legal organization and defined territory, the nation is a community of will: undefined, volatile and changing with times and influences. He dismisses race and “blood” as determining factors, and even language and religion may not be decisive in the identification process. There is thus room for racial mixture in the great Western nations, allowing for the smooth assimilation of their Jewish populations.

Kjellén’s depreciation of the importance of religion in the nation-forming process was probably influenced by his appreciation, like many Scandinavians at the time, of Wilhelminian Germany, a state of two major Christian denominations and what in 1916 was a patriotic, successful and assimilated Jewish minority. In Germany and beyond, developments after World War I showed that a common language, either defining the territorial state or used by the state to assimilate linguistic minorities, is the most effective means of nationalizing a territory.

Nevertheless, the case of the central south Slavic language once called Serbo-Croatian splitting into four officially different languages emerging from divergent patterns of colonization by powers of different religions – Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin – shows the importance of having strong support for a rigid definition of what is “correct” (and what is incorrect!) in speaking and writing a recognized language. And language is one of the most persistent shibboleths – actually the original one – in defining the boundary of an ethnic group on the way to forming a specific cultural nationality. A common language is still regarded the most effective way of communicating nation-ness. Or, as the statement popularized by the Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich would have it, “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

The relationship of state nationalism to the cultural concept of nation is obviously complicated. A useful contribution was made in the 1950s by the multiethnic political scientist Karl Wolfgang Deutsch. In his *Nationalism and Social Communication*, he set out to explain how states act to make the population of their territory form a nation, to express solidarity towards “their” country. Parallel efforts can be found in Benedict Anderson’s characterization of the nation as an “imagined community,” and Rogers Brubaker’s characterization of states’ efforts to homogenize ethnic communities as “nationalizing.” Unfortunately, however, in spite of these and other contributions to the understanding of the complex relationship of nation and state in the real world, the conceptual battle has apparently been won by the formulation of nation as a formal territorial organization.
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**Defining minorities**

The recent debate in Sweden has been totally dominated by this view of the nation, especially in response to statements by members of the populist *Sverigedemokraterna* party (Swedish Democrats) that the Sámi (and by the same logic, conceivably Jews and Roma) are not Swedish. But in a cultural interpretation of nation, all national minorities, while citizens of their state of domicile, are by definition not members of the majority nationality. By choosing to identify as members of the minority, individuals are given exclusive rights such as protection of customs, language and religion. Sweden ratified the European conventions on language and minorities with some hesitation. Its choice of defined minorities and languages may be debatable, but in the case of the Sámi, the Roma and the Finnish-speaking population of the north, it marked the end of a century of forced assimilation that started around 1880.

In the case of the Finnish speakers, it is worth remembering that when some Social Democratic government ministers tried to reintroduce language rights in the 1930s, they were met by heavy resistance from local leaders. The fear of being regarded as Finnish (and even becoming victims of Finnish irredentism) led to a denial of the value of the language and its culture and eventually to the creation of a “new language,” *Meänkieli*, based on the local dialects of Finnish not supported by the teaching of standard Finnish. In my research, I found that the subsequent decline of Finnish led to a decline in northern multiculturalism and the slowdown of cross-border contacts.8

In this period, policy toward the Sámi was somewhat different. Sámi reindeer nomads were encouraged to keep their identity but were patronized and linguistically Swedified. Other Sámi were until recently expected to assimilate, resulting in internal conflicts within the Sámi community, and in the considerable decline of a language already weakened by strong local differences as well as the split of the Sámi nation into three or even four territorial states at the northern tip of Europe.

The potential choices as to their identity facing individuals in relation to the national state are “otherness,” total assimilation into the majority, or a dual identification. State policies of assimilation have led to changes of identity, to refusal in the form of enhanced minority identification, and to the emergence of a “middle way” – the creation of a new identity separate from the majority and the “kin-state” identity. This has often been based on the nonstandardized version of the related neighbouring majority language, like that of *Meänkieli* in Sweden, the rise of a Silesian identity, *Windisch* in Austria, and Corsican...
and Alsatian in France. These middle-way phenomena are often short-lived, effectively disappearing within a generation or two.

For immigrants the choice is between being isolated within the diaspora group and intentional assimilation – or sometimes both, related to specialization into different walks of life. Sometimes specific factors have allowed for different choices. The East European Jews arriving in Western Europe could fairly easily drop their colloquial Yiddish in favour of the majority language because they could keep their liturgy in Hebrew. Estonian refugees in Sweden in the 1940s successfully chose societal assimilation while cultivating their native language, preparing for a possible return.

Against the unequivocal claim of the national state, the claim of the cultural nation is problematic. Who has the right to claim to be Swedish, Sámi, Kurdish? In the aftermath of the plebiscites organized to territorially define the new or restored “nation-states” after the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919, it was found that a substantial number of Polish-speaking Protestants, the Masurians, had opted for Germany – since for them being Polish meant being Catholic. As Einhorn’s story demonstrates, this also affected the Polish Jews, who had no territorial option (except for the then utopian option of Zionism). In Silesia, with an ethnically divided population, some districts voted for the restored Polish republic. They were wrong, a German geography professor wrote: German culture was superior!

They were welcome to participate in a superior culture. As we know. It was only a decade later that German nationalism became exclusive: Poles allegedly belonged to a lower race, not to be mixed with the German one.9 And Jews and Roma had to be eradicated to allow the culture to flourish.

History partly repeated itself after Nazi Germany’s defeat in 1945. Many inhabitants of Germany’s South Schleswig chose, or returned to, Danish-mindedness, not only in response to the unspoiled infrastructure and relatively unharmed democracy in Denmark, but also in protest against the influx of German refugees, pushed out from territories claimed and ethnically cleansed by the Soviet Union and Poland. Among the reborn Danes there were even signs of racism against the eastern Germans, who were allegedly of “Slavic blood.”10 This reference to a racial difference soon waned, but even before the Nazi appropriation of the concept of race and to the end of World War II, the interpretation of race as a quality differentiating different peoples was commonplace.

In Swedish scientific journals, domestic Jews were usually seen as an integrated part of the Swedish population, while German and Eastern European Jews who came to Sweden to escape Nazism were met with resistance from the legal system and, with some
remarkable exceptions, in the press, usually on allegations of taking jobs from the local population. Except for the minuscule pro-Nazi press, direct anti-Semitism was obsolete or hidden behind references to Swedish neutrality.

One dilemma in cultural nationalism is the relation between autochthonous (indigenous) minorities and immigrant groups. If a territorial state recognizes an obligation toward its domestic minorities to protect their difference from the majority, what is its obligation toward people coming from abroad – to help them assimilate or to help them keep their distinctiveness?11 Russian authorities have been ardent in their criticism of Estonia and Latvia for their “refusal to grant minority rights” to domestic Russians. But with the exception of a small number of descendants of Russians who have been in these countries since Tsarist times, who were granted minority rights in the 1920s,12 the Russians and Russian speakers are descendants of immigrants who came during a time of forced annexation to the Soviet Union. Most members of this group thus cannot refer to a status of national minority, only to their individual human rights.13

The situation of the Roma in Sweden and other West European countries is somewhat similar. While Sweden (and Finland under Swedish rule) has long had an autochthonous Roma population, this has since the 1970s been augmented by immigrants from the Balkans, strengthening the position of the group but also adding to the internal differences within it.14

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Europe: Multiethnicity moves west

In a very general sense, each Western European state, using both carrots and sticks, successfully integrated its residents into a rather homogeneous population, forming a nation. The main exception is Belgium, and Spain is perhaps another. In Eastern Europe, independent states are only a century old and were originally multiethnic, despite Wilson’s concept of nation-building. Nazi Germany managed to exterminate the large Jewish and Roma communities in Eastern Europe, and the aftermath of World War II resulted in the ethnic cleansing of German minorities in the area. Under the Communist regimes, national minorities were officially recognized, but put under strong pressure and sometimes allowed to escape if paid by their Western kin-states. In the Soviet Union, the smaller republics were infused with ethnic Russians.
With the exception of the Baltic states, the countries of Eastern Europe have thus attained substantial ethnic homogenization – in the Polish case reaching almost 100 per cent. In Western Europe the situation is in many ways totally different, with an increasing influx of refugees, workers and other migrants. These migrants came first from Eastern Europe and, in the colonizing countries, from their earlier dependencies, and later from areas of civil war and other difficulties. Other links are linguistic (Romanians to Spain and Italy) and religious (Lithuanians to Ireland).

What is peculiar is that coincidence as well as earlier ties has helped create the ethnic mix of specific countries. Denmark has a conspicuous Tamil population and Norway an Urdu-speaking group, while Sweden, after receiving around 200 Suryoyo (Syriac Christians from Turkey) in 1966, now has a population of more than 100,000 of this group, centred southwest of Stockholm. The great influx of refugees and migrants from Syria and the Middle East in 2015, mainly to Germany and Sweden, brought a large number of Afghan Shiite Hazara boys and young men, evidently sent by their families who had taken refuge in Iran.

Difficulties in handling the great influx fuel the rise of right-wing extremist parties. In Sweden, all political parties other than the Swedish Democrats have, until recently, been unwilling to restrict immigration, for fear of being associated with the populist anti-immigration party. Recently, however, the larger parties have taken a firm stand against opening the borders of Europe to a new wave of migrants, and only leftist and environmental parties with a feminist agenda seem to endorse further entry of refugees.

Is there a feeling of “Festung Europa” – Fortress Europe? In a way, it seems as if Brexit, pressures from Russia and fear for migrants has consolidated an acceptance of the European Union in most of its member states, but it is a feeling of practicality rather than sympathy.

Back to Jerzy Einhorn

After some years, Jerzy Einhorn spoke Swedish, received citizenship and was fully integrated into Swedish society. He became a Swede but, to the extent he himself wished, retained his Jewish identity and Polish experience.

Citizenship is a legal document but also a certificate of access to the rights and obligations of the territorial state. This usually requires an acceptable command of the state language. Nationality is something else. Majorities and minorities have a right to choose national identity according to their origin and experience. Nationality is not a digital characteristic – identities can be split and shared in many ways.
Notes


4 In Spain, the official use of the word *nation* for Catalonia has been prohibited by the Spanish Supreme Court. According to Spanish legal scholar Asier Garrido Muñoz, “With respect to the status of Catalonia, the Constitutional Court rendered on 28 June 2010 what for many is the ultimate source of all the current political turmoil: the judgment on the constitutionality of the so-called ‘Estatuto de Cataluña’ (hereinafter ‘the 2006 Statute’), a piece of legislation regulating the exercise of regional powers whose adoption required consent by the legislative chambers in Madrid ... The term ‘national’ used in Article 8 to qualify the symbols of Catalonia was considered equivalent to the term ‘nationality’ appearing in Article 2 of the Constitution ... Article 2 refers to the ‘indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards’ while it protects ‘the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed and the solidarity among them all’” (“Catalan Independence in the Spanish Constitution and Courts,” *Oxford Constitutional Law*, retrieved from https://oxcon.ouplaw.com/page/Catalan-independence).

5 In Kjellén’s time and up to 1945, the concept of race was used in Swedish academic geography and anthropology, e.g. in differentiating three races in Sweden, the Swedes, the Finns and the Lapps (Sámi), but there are no signs of a ranking or discrimination according to these classifications. More recently, the concept of race, absent from European discourse since 1945, has been taken up in certain leftist circles, which have accused the Swedish legal structure of structural racism. Their definition of *race* seems utterly vague: racialization is defined as the tendency not to include immigrants in Swedish society, which is a domestic xenophobia related not to race but to negative attitudes to cultures and religions that deviate from the majority norm. In a recent article, a journalist with the Stockholm daily *Dagens Nyheter* defined the earlier attitude of Swedish authorities toward “Bosnians” (evidently ordinary former Yugoslav citizens) as “racist.” Race is a totally useless category in social life except in relation to forces believing in the segregation or oppression of peoples with a different skin colour, but *racism* has been adopted as a general derogatory term (just as *fascism* is used to label groups deemed undemocratic, irrespective of their affinity to Fascism and its specific authoritarian ideology, which is clearly distinguishable from National Socialism and Communism).

6 In the biblical book of Judges (chapter 12), the word *shibboleth* (meaning an ear of grain) was used to distinguish members of one tribe from those of another according to their way pronouncing the *sh* sound. A common language is still regarded the most effective way of communicating “nation-ness.”


11 For a discussion of the definition of national and linguistic minorities in European and


14 See, e.g., Yaron Matras, *Romani: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Chapter 10, “Romani Sociolinguistics,” pp. 238–250. The Council of Europe publishes reports under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. While Sweden officially recognizes Romani Chib, the report also includes efforts to document different varieties of Romani, also including those spoken by more recent immigrants (*European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages: Seventh Periodical Report Presented to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in Accordance with Article 15 of the Charter: Sweden*, retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/swedenpr7-en/168095445a).
The world’s most valuable resource,” noted The Economist in 2017, “is no longer oil, but data.” According to the same publication, in 2019 “big firms spent $32bn ... on cloud services” – “cloud services” being where our data are stored.¹

Three books, all published in 2019, tell you more about data than you ever thought you wanted to know. 

*Permanent Record* is about Edward Snowden’s short but memorable career in American intelligence. He was born in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in 1983. He was a member, he says, of the “last undigitized generation, whose childhoods aren’t up on the cloud but are mostly trapped in analog formats like handwritten diaries and Polaroids and VHS cassettes, tangible and imperfect artifacts that degrade with age and can be lost irretrievably.”

His was also the first generation to be raised with, if not by, computers. His parents seem serious and devoted, descended on both sides from a long line of Navy personnel. Oliver Stone’s 2016 film *Snowden* makes its subject appear right-wing, at least in contrast with his girlfriend (now wife) who drags him to an Iraq war protest. In the book, Snowden and his parents seem patriotic in a “good citizenship” way. They don’t have strongly partisan views. Snowden joins the Marines, and later the CIA, to contribute to his country.

He tells an interesting anecdote that conveys, I think, the family’s politics. His mother loved giving him math challenges. She’d buy him books and toys if he could mentally total their prices. He had to add in the 3 per cent sales tax.
“Why?”

“Everything we buy, we have to pay three percent to the government.”

“What do they do with it?”

“You like roads, buddy? You like bridges? ... The government uses that money to fix them. They use that money to fill the library with books.”

Some time later, she told him,

“They raised the sales tax. Now you have to add four percent.”

“So now the library will get even more books?”

“Let’s hope.”

One day, his father brought home a computer. Soon afterward, he could “dial up and connect to something new called the Internet”:

Internet access, and the emergence of the Web, was my generation’s big bang or Precambrian explosion. It irrevocably altered the course of my life ... From the age of twelve or so, I tried to spend my every waking moment online ... Gradually, I stopped sleeping at night and instead slept by day in school. My grades went back into free fall.

Snowden and education never got along, and eventually he found work using his computer talents. Then there was a news report “about a plane hitting one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center,” and then “a second plane just hit the other tower.” Snowden writes that he “accepted all the claims retailed by the media as facts ... I wanted to be a liberator. I wanted to free the oppressed.” He thought he could best serve his country “behind a terminal, but a normal IT job seemed too comfortable and safe.” He wanted to work with the CIA or the National Security Agency (NSA), but he didn’t have the educational qualifications:

The more I read around online, however, the more I realized that the post-9/11 world was a world of exceptions. The agencies were growing so much and so quickly, especially on the technical side, that they’d sometimes waive the degree requirements for military veterans.

He joined the Army. That ended poorly, with multiple fractures in his legs and “administrative separation ... only available to enlistees who’d been in the services fewer than six months.” He decided to follow the inevitable, by putting his computer skills to use for the government. After 9/11, they were desperate for people with computer skills. But by this time, the structure of government service had changed:
I was amazed to find that there were very few opportunities to serve my country directly, at least in a meaningful technical role. I had a better chance of working as a contractor for a private company that served my country for profit; and I had the best chance, it turned out, of working as a subcontractor for a private company that contracted with another private company that served my country for profit.

Snowden rose rapidly through the ranks. His job was to “make it technologically feasible for a single government to collect all the world’s digital communications, store them for ages, and search through them at will.” But gathering and storing data on U.S. citizens was illegal, and high government officials and top politicians were lying about it. In early June 2013, while hiding out in a Hong Kong hotel, he went public. He was not yet 30 years old.

The U.S. cancelled Snowden’s passport while he was in transit through Russia. I was relieved to read that a year later his wife joined him. They’ve been there ever since.

It’s easy to admire Snowden; he was cautious and disciplined. Without mentioning names, he distinguishes himself from Julian Assange: “I disclosed the government’s documents only to journalists. In fact, the number of documents that I disclosed directly to the public is zero. I believe, just as those journalists believe, that a government may keep some information concealed.”

Snowden was heroic, but I have to admit I’m not as outraged by his government’s behaviour as he is. I oppose it in principle, but I don’t feel threatened by it. As the cliché goes, “If you haven’t done anything wrong, you have nothing to fear.” On the other hand, Christopher Wylie’s Mindf*ck (sic) scared the shit out of me.
Christopher Wylie was born in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1989. His parents were doctors. He spent his high school years in a wheelchair as a result of two relatively rare conditions: “Not long after I discovered the computer lab, it became the one room at school where I didn’t feel alienated. Outside, there were either bullies or patronizing staff.”

He learned about webpages and JavaScript and other things I don’t understand. He “felt like a conjurer.” At 15, he spent a summer at Lester B. Pearson United World College, with students from around the world, and became interested in politics. That school year, he started skipping classes to attend public events with local members of Parliament. He asked questions and offered opinions:

It was liberating to find my voice. Like any teenager, I was exploring who I was, but for someone gay and in a wheelchair, this was an even bigger challenge ... I began to realize that many of the things I was living through were not simply personal issues – they were also political issues. My challenges were political. My life was political. My mere existence was political [emphasis in original].

He was brought to the attention of a local Liberal MP and offered a job in Ottawa. But first he spent the summer of 2007 in Montréal, hanging out in hacker spaces frequented by French Canadian technoranarchists ... By then, with treatment, I could shuffle around without a wheelchair ... Most hackers couldn’t care less what you look like or if you walk funny. They share your love of the craft and want to help you get better at it ... My brief exposure to hacking communities left a permanent impression. You learn that no system is absolute. Nothing is impenetrable, and barriers are a dare.

When he arrived in Ottawa, Facebook was big and Twitter was growing, but no one in the Liberal Party knew what to do with them. The Liberals sent several people, including Wylie, to observe Barack Obama’s campaign. He was expecting to learn new media, like YouTube; instead he learned about data and “the modeling they used to analyze and understand that data.” He learned that “it was those numbers – and the predictive algorithms they created – that separated Obama from anyone who had ever run for president before.” With data on “age, gender, income, race, homeownership – even magazine subscriptions and airline miles” – you could predict whom people would vote for and what issues were most important to
them, and craft messages that might sway their opinions:

For me, this was a wholly new way of understanding elections. Data was a force for good, powering this campaign of change. It was being used to produce first-time voters, to reach people who felt left out. The deeper I got into it, the more I thought that data would be the savior of politics.

Christopher Wylie in 2013 PHOTO CHATHAM HOUSE FLICKR

He was eager to share what he’d learned. He had his supporters but, in the end, the Liberal Party of Canada didn’t want to spend the money on something they didn’t quite understand. Soon afterward, “The LPC was devastated in the federal election by the Conservative Party of Canada, which had invested in sophisticated data systems at the behest of its imported Republican advisers.”

In 2010, at age 21, Wylie left politics for law school at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He “flourished in London and soon gained a wide circle of friends.” He was soon tempted by an offer from the U.K. Liberal Democrats. It was the only party to oppose the war in Iraq, he notes, but it was a poster on their office wall that finally lured him in: “No one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.” It all makes for a very funny story – unless you’re a Liberal Democrat. Wylie provided an extensive and devastating report, and the party elected to shoot the messenger. In 2015, “the party was eviscerated, losing forty-nine of its fifty-seven seats in Parliament.”

He was ready for something new. A Lib Dem connection had suggested Wylie apply for a job with SCL Group, because SCL was “looking for ‘data people for some behavior research project’ involving the military.” After several interviews, Alexander Nix, an SCL director, “offered me a three-month contract to do, essentially, whatever I wanted ... After all the agonies of dealing with the LPC and the Lib Dems, it was incredibly enticing to be given free rein.” In June 2013, he started at SCL.

Meanwhile, Wylie had started a PhD in fashion at University of the Arts London. Nix agreed to cover his tuition. SCL had contracts with the British and U.S. military. Wylie’s days alternated between “fashion models and cyberwarfare,” but it was models of another kind, “neural networks, computer vision, and autoencoders,” that attracted him:

At SCL we would watch countless numbers of radical jihadi propaganda videos, and we noticed that, beyond the violence of the clips that make it onto the news, there was a rich and well-articulated aesthetic to their style of content.
Cool cars were showcased. There would be music ... They tried to position their backward ideology as somehow modern or futuristic in a way that echoed the old Italian Futurists’ promotion of a fascism for tomorrow ... These films were propagating a grotesque cult of violence and hate ... Their style was self-indulgent and naively romantic, and it bordered on kitsch. Even terrorists have pop culture.

Around this time, in September 2013, I distinctly remember thinking, How cool is this? I get to work in culture, but not just for someone’s branding campaign. I get to work in culture for the defense of our democracy.

SCL was trying to undermine extremist movements. If you could get enough information on their members, you could sow discord: “The most susceptible targets are typically the ones who exhibit neurotic or narcissistic traits ... because they are more prone to feelings of envy and entitlement, which are strong motivators of rule-breaking and hierarchy-defying behavior.” To find the most susceptible targets, you needed a great deal of data, more than you could sort manually. So you also needed algorithms to analyze the data. That’s what they did at SCL: gather truckloads of data and analyze it. They did it for military security; and then they did it for anyone who had the money to pay for it.

In Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim’s film *The Great Hack*, SCL CEO Alexander Nix is shown pitching the company by describing its work in Trinidad and Tobago:

There are two main political parties, one for the Blacks, one for the Indians. And they screw each other. So, we were working for the Indians, and we went to the client and we said we want to target the youth. And we try and increase apathy. The campaign has to be non-political, cause the kids don’t care about politics. It has to be reactive, cause they’re lazy. So we came up with this campaign which was all about “be part of the gang,” “do something cool,” “be part of a movement,” and it was called the “DO SO!” campaign. “Do so! Don’t vote!” ... It’s a sign of resistance against, not the government but against politics and voting. [We see video advertising and clips from “Do so!” rallies.] We knew that when it came to voting, all the Afro-Caribbean kids wouldn’t vote because they “Do so!” but all the Indian kids would do what their parents told them to do, which was to go out and vote ... Now the difference in 18- to 35-year-old turnout was like 40 per cent. And that swung the election about 6 per cent, which is all that’s needed in an election that’s very close.²

That’s what they did at SCL: gather truckloads of data and analyze it. They did it for military security; and then they did it for anyone who had the money to pay for it.
It was a young field and Wylie’s task was to develop it by gaining access to new sources of data and writing new algorithms to analyze them: “One unintended consequence of having large pluralities of citizens connected via mobile phone networks was that everybody could be traced, tracked, profiled, and communicated with.” There were “data brokers such as Experian, Acxiom, and niche firms with specialist lists from evangelical churches, media companies, and so on. Even some state governments [in the United States] will sell you lists of hunting, fishing, or gun licensees.”

A great deal of data came from Facebook, which used the data it gathered to sell targeted advertising but didn’t seem to care much who else used it and what they used it for. And when you joined Facebook, you gave them permission to access all your friends’ data too. Eventually SCL had information on hundreds of millions of people, and once they had 5,000 bits of information on you (everything you clicked or liked, every email you sent or YouTube you watched, every Google search you searched), so the claim went, they knew you better than you knew yourself.

The algorithms were about profiling. They’d categorize personality by ratings on five scales: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism ... This sounds simple, but the Big Five model can be an immensely useful tool in predicting voters’ behavior ... Obama ran on change, hope, and progress – in other words, a platform of openness to new ideas. Republicans, on the other hand, tend to focus on stability, independence, and tradition – in effect, a platform of conscientiousness.

Each of the Big Five traits are found in pretty much everyone. There’s also a “dark triad” of traits – narcissism (extreme self-centeredness), Machiavellianism (ruthless self-interest), and psychopathy (emotional detachment) – that are less common and maladaptive, meaning that those who exhibit them are generally more prone to anti-social behavior, including criminal acts.

In October 2013, Steve Bannon arrived at SCL, with truckloads of money provided by eccentric right-wing backers. When he first met Bannon, Wylie writes,

We talked for four hours – not only about politics but about fashion and culture, Foucault, the third-wave feminist Judith Butler, and the nature of the fractured self. On the surface, Bannon seemed utterly predictable – another old, straight white guy – but he spoke with a certain wokeness I hadn’t expected at all. In fact, I quickly decided he was kind
of cool ... He was no political hack, but a fellow nerd given permission to speak freely.

When Wylie joined SCL, he believed that data collection and profiling were being used for positive ends, to search out fanatics and prevent acts of terrorism. That changed soon after Bannon’s arrival and the creation of a new SCL subsidiary, Cambridge Analytica. CA continued to search out fanatics, but for different purposes. Bannon was out to organize fanatics. CA would create new Facebook pages “with vague names like County Patriots or I Love My Country.” As people joined these groups, CA would post videos and articles:

Conversations would rage on the group page, with people commiserating about how terrible or unfair something was. CA broke down social barriers, cultivating relationships across groups. All the while it was testing and refining messages ...

Once a group reached a certain number of members, CA would set up a physical event. CA teams would choose small venues – a coffee shop or bar to make the crowd feel larger ... People would show up and find a fellowship of anger and paranoia. This naturally led them to feel like they were part of a giant movement, and it allowed them to further feed off one another’s paranoia and fear of conspiracy. ... The meetings took place in counties all across the United States, starting with the early Republican primary states, and people would get more and more fired up at what they saw as “us vs. them.” What began as their digital fantasy, sitting alone in their bedrooms late at night clicking on links, was becoming their new reality.

That’s one example of what you could do with a lot of data and the ability to select the people you want. But data and technical ability weren’t enough. Wylie describes CA’s work for the Leave side in the Brexit campaign:

The problem with Remain was that they completely failed to understand what they were up against. As Cambridge Analytica identified, provoking anger and indignation reduced the need for full rational explanations [and would] immunize target voters to the notion that the economy would suffer. [Remain] neglected to stop and ask people what they thought the economy was in the first place. Cambridge Analytica identified that many people in non-urban regions or in lower socioeconomic strata often externalized the notion of “the economy” to something that only the wealthy and metropolitan elite participated in. “The economy” was not their job in a local store; it’s something that bankers did.

Pro-Brexit leaders knew that to win they would need to attract a few progressive voters:
One of the most compelling progressive arguments for Brexit was pretty simple ... Under EU rules, migrants to Britain from countries like France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Austria did not need a visa to work and live in Britain. But migrants from, say, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, or Jamaica were required to undergo extensive screening and difficult immigration procedures ... As the Remain campaign paraded around its “pro-immigration” messages to defend the EU, what many people of color saw was the tacit whiteness of that very message – that it really meant rights for some immigrants ... And it was by identifying this bubbling resentment that the pro-Brexit movement managed to create a counterintuitive alliance between some sections of immigrant communities and cohorts of jingoist Brexiteers who wanted them all to “go home” [emphasis in original].

One more example:

In August 2016, the football player Colin Kaepernick refused to stand for the American national anthem to protest systemic racism and police brutality toward African Americans and other minorities in the United States. The fashion brand Nike, Kaepernick’s sponsor, stood behind the athlete, and a controversy ensued ... Cybersecurity firms also identified fake Nike coupons originating from alt-right groups that targeted African American social media users with offers like “75% off all shoes for people of color.” The coupons were intended to create scenarios in which unwitting African American customers would try to use the coupons in a Nike store, where they would be refused. In the age of viral videos, this scenario could in turn create “real” footage showcasing a racist trope of an “angry black man” demanding free stuff in a store. So why would these disinformation operations target a fashion company and attempt to weaponize its brand? Because the objective of this hostile propaganda is not simply to interfere with our politics, or even to damage our companies. The objective is to tear apart our social fabric. They want us to hate one another.

By August 2014, less than a year after Bannon’s arrival, it all became too much for the one-time adviser to the Liberal Party of Canada. Two years after Wylie and CA parted company, Donald Trump became the GOP nominee: “If my hunch was correct, Cambridge Analytica was not only using the data tool I had worked on to manipulate American voters into supporting him, it may have been knowingly or unknowingly working with Russians to sway the election. ... I felt sick to my stomach. And I knew I had to tell someone.” A few months after Trump’s election victory, Wylie went public. When he testified before the U.S. Congress, in June 2018, he was 29 years old.
The digital arms race

A second book about Cambridge Analytica has been published: Brittany Kaiser’s Targeted. Kaiser, who also has a background in progressive politics, joined CA around the time Wylie was leaving. Targeted doesn’t add much to Wylie’s story. Kaiser seems mostly concerned with explaining why she stayed at CA for four years. None of the three books has an index, perhaps an unfortunate result of the shift toward electronic books.

The three books together are an introduction to another world. It would be nice to think that companies and governments are tightening up rules and legislation to protect our private data, but my guess is that the increasing sophistication of our cybersecurity experts will be matched by the increasing sophistication of our hackers, in a kind of digital-evolution arms race. Snowden, Wylie, Kaiser and a host of others have myriad suggestions. I don’t mean to denigrate them, but they don’t make me feel safe from predators like the wealthy among us who will stop at absolutely nothing in pursuit of their ends. The outcome, if not their intention, seems to be an increasing number of failed organizations and states.

Back in March, Snopes.com declared as “false” rumours that U.S. representatives had used COVID-19 legislation to give themselves a $25 million pay raise. Who started and promoted the rumour?

Would a Cambridge Analytica clone incite Indigenous people to block railways in support of other Indigenous groups? Did you know that your computer’s camera can watch you, even when the computer is off?

The irony is that while Bannon and friends are out to create distrust and paranoia in all of us, these three books (and a host of films) do exactly that in me.

Notes

1 The Economist, May 6, 2017; The Economist, February 8, 2020.
2 https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2455872791324569

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The other epidemic: Deaths of despair
Anne Case and Angus Deaton provide a compelling account of the problem, but anemic solutions

By Mark Pancer


As I write this review, the world is in the throes of the worst pandemic it has seen in a century. Globally, hundreds of thousands have had their lives cut short by the COVID-19 virus, millions have been infected and the end of the pandemic is nowhere in sight. The United States has been hit a body blow by the virus, experiencing more deaths and infections than any other country in the world. As of May 12, the virus had claimed more than 80,000 American lives, some 29 per cent of the world’s total.

But this is not the only epidemic that the United States is currently experiencing. According to Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton in their book Deaths of Despair, America was already in the midst of an epidemic – one that has shortened the lives of many more people than COVID-19 – before the novel coronavirus even reared its head. The term deaths of despair is one that Case and Deaton began to use after discovering that thousands of Americans were dying of three interrelated causes, all rooted in feelings of despair: opioid overdoses, suicide and alcohol-related diseases such as cirrhosis of the liver. So many lives have been lost to these causes that over the last few years the United States, unlike any other country in the developed world, has experienced a decrease in longevity – the first such decrease in a century.
In a groundbreaking study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in 2015, Case and Deaton discovered that deaths of despair were hitting one segment of the American population much more than any other: middle-aged white, non-Hispanic men and women. In subsequent research, they found that the epidemic was even more concentrated; its primary effects were among middle-aged white Americans without a college education. Their book provides an in-depth account of their exploration into why this group of Americans has suffered from deaths of despair so much more than any other, including black and Hispanic Americans, who, on average, have even lower incomes than this group does.

Up until about 1999, mortality rates followed the same downward trajectory among midlife whites (aged 45 to 54) in the United States as they did in almost all wealthy countries. This trend reversed itself around 1999, when mortality rates for American whites started increasing, while those of other countries continued their decline. Case and Deaton determined that if the trend of decreasing mortality rates had continued in the United States, there would have been more than 600,000 fewer deaths among midlife Americans. These numbers indicate an epidemic that, to date, surpasses COVID-19 in terms of its destruction of life.

The despair experienced by midlife, less educated white Americans is evident in many aspects of their lives. According to national health surveys, by a ratio of nearly 3 to 1, individuals in this group are more likely than those with a degree to rate their health as poor or only fair. They are also more likely to experience symptoms of severe mental distress, such as feelings of sadness, hopelessness and lack of self-worth. Differences between less and more educated whites are evident in their physical capabilities as well. Those without a bachelor’s degree report more difficulty in going about everyday activities, such as climbing stairs, going out to shop or walking short distances. In 2017, 13 per cent of midlife whites without a college degree reported that they were unable to work, compared to fewer than 2 per cent of those with a degree.

Underlying many of these complaints is the experience of physical pain. Reports of being in pain have been increasing steadily.

If the trend of decreasing mortality rates had continued in the United States, there would have been more than 600,000 fewer deaths among midlife Americans.
in middle-aged Americans, to the extent that those in midlife report more pain than do older Americans. According to Gallup polling, in which Americans were asked if they had experienced significant pain “yesterday” – that is, the day before they were asked the survey questions – nearly 30 per cent of whites indicated that they had. Once again, however, there were substantial differences between those with a college degree and those without, with much higher proportions of less educated white Americans indicating that they had experienced significant pain the previous day. In looking at the distribution of “pain yesterday” across the country, Case and Deacon found that pain was more prevalent in areas with lower levels of education, such as Appalachia, than in areas with higher levels of education, such as the Bay Area of California. Interestingly, those areas with high proportions of individuals reporting pain were more likely to have a majority voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

According to the authors, physical pain, mental distress and death are fuelling the despair that is felt by white Americans without a college degree. But what has caused the suffering and despair that has increased so precipitously over the last 20 years for this segment of the U.S. population? Poverty is one possible answer, but Case and Deaton argue that poverty is a “false trail” in the pursuit of an explanation for the phenomenon. For one thing, the timing and direction of changes in poverty levels and deaths of despair do not match up. Poverty rates declined in the years following the Great Recession of 2008–09, while deaths of despair increased. Also, less educated whites had higher incomes than blacks over this period, but blacks, even though they were poorer, were not experiencing nearly as many deaths of despair, and their mortality rates were not increasing. If poverty had had a straightforward causal effect on deaths of despair, one would have thought that the Great Recession would have resulted in a huge jump in deaths. This did not happen, even in countries like Greece and Spain, where incomes fell as unemployment rates more than doubled over the course of the recession.

Another possible explanation for the growing divide between white Americans with and without a college degree has to do with the kinds of work that these two groups do. In addition to providing wages, work gives meaning, status and a sense of identity to people’s lives. It also provides the resources necessary to marry and have children.

Poverty rates declined in the years following the Great Recession of 2008–09, while deaths of despair increased. Also, less educated whites had higher incomes than blacks over this period, but blacks were not experiencing nearly as many deaths of despair.
Case and Deaton talk about two escalators related to work – one for the educated and one for the relatively uneducated. After 1970, the escalator for those with a college degree started moving faster than it ever had before; salaries and living standards increased rapidly. The escalator for those without a degree “was stalled or hardly moving at all.” These individuals experienced deteriorating living standards and very few prospects for the future. The result was steadily increasing income inequality, and even increased physical separation, between the educated and uneducated groups. In contrast, black Americans, though they earned less than whites, saw their incomes increase over time, and so they did not experience the same kind of “stalled elevator” phenomenon that less educated whites did.

Case and Deaton talk about a “college premium” – the additional income that individuals with a college degree earn compared to those without a degree. That premium has increased substantially over time. It has occurred not only because those with a college degree earn substantially higher incomes, but because those without a degree have experienced a reduction in their earnings.

But more important than the declining incomes experienced by whites with less education is the kind of work they were now doing. As well-paid, unionized jobs in manufacturing disappeared with automation or were outsourced to other countries, those who could find work moved to nonunionized, lower-paid and lower-status jobs. They ended up working for companies that supply cheap labour to corporations such as Google or Facebook, without even benefiting from any status that they might have derived from being employed by a high-profile corporation.

The personal consequences of this degradation of employment for the less educated have been dramatic. Whites without a college education have been increasingly less likely to get married, belong to churches or clubs or have stable families. Deprived of the social capital that these connections provide, they succumb to despair. The proportion of less educated midlife whites who, in national surveys, reported being unhappy with their lives has increased steadily since the late 1990s, while it has remained constant (and much lower) among those with a college degree.

The longer title of Case and Deaton’s book is *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (emphasis added). The last few chapters of the book form a section entitled “Why is Capitalism Failing So Many?” Like others who have decried the “crony capitalism” that has become increasingly prevalent in the United States, Case and Deaton lay the blame for much of the pain experienced by less educated whites on an economic system that has been
manipulated by the wealthy and powerful to reward an educated elite at the expense of less educated working Americans. These wealthy individuals and corporations have used their considerable resources to induce legislators to enact policies and regulations that protect them from competition and allow them to reap huge profits by keeping down the wages and benefits of less powerful groups such as whites without a college education.

According to Case and Deaton, nowhere is this process more evident than in the American health care system, which they describe as “a leading example of an institution that, under political protection, redistributes income upward to hospitals, physicians, device makers, and pharmaceutical companies while delivering among the worst health outcomes of any rich country.” The cost of this system is enormous – nearly 20 per cent of the country’s GDP in 2017, considerably more than any other country spends on its health care. At the same time, the outcomes of these expenditures are much worse than the outcomes experienced by other wealthy countries. For example, countries such as Canada, the U.K., Australia and Switzerland spend thousands less per capita on their health care systems, but citizens of these countries can expect to live years longer than Americans can. Case and Deaton determined that if Americans spent as much on health care as Canadians did, they would save $1.4 trillion, equivalent to $11,000 per household. The difference in costs between the United States and other wealthy countries comes from higher salaries for health care providers, higher costs of drugs, medical procedures and administration, and more extensive (and unnecessary) use of expensive diagnostic procedures, among other things. Case and Deaton suggest that the health care industry, which spent more than $500 million on lobbying in 2018, is a “protection racket” – one of the largest “forces redistributing power from labor to capital, and from workers and consumers to corporations and wealthy professionals.”

In the last chapter, the authors address themselves to the question of what can be done to lessen despair among less educated whites and the destruction of quality and length of life that it produces. They consider a number of possible ways in which this might be accomplished. Given their complaints about the health care system, one of their major recommendations is to provide universal health insurance, with cost controls, in the way that other wealthy countries do. Another of their recommendations is to increase the minimum wage substantially (from $7.25 per hour at the time of writing the book to $15).
They consider, and reject as a potential solution, the provision of a universal basic income to those whose incomes are below the poverty line, because they claim that it might keep people from seeking employment. This, they surmise, would result in more people not working, and therefore foregoing the economic, social and status benefits that being employed can provide. They also reject increasing taxes on the wealthy; rather, they would ensure that rich individuals and corporations cannot use their power to enrich themselves by exploiting the less educated. This would be accomplished through stricter enforcement of antitrust laws and putting a stop to “rent-seeking” – using political means to unfairly advantage wealthy and powerful individuals and corporations so as to maintain or increase their profits.

*Deaths of Despair* is an important book. It clearly and compellingly tells the story of how the lives of whites without a college education have been degraded to the extent that thousands are destroying themselves through suicide, opioid overdose and alcohol abuse. And they are not only destroying themselves. They have become a political force that helped elect a president whose failings have wreaked havoc on the American economic and political system, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors also provide a compelling account of the profound way in which the health care system in the United States has harmed rather than helped the economic and physical health of its citizens, particularly its less educated citizens.

The strategies that Case and Deaton offer for dealing with this epidemic of deaths of despair, unfortunately, are rather anemic. While they at times indicate that some of their suggested strategies might provoke opposition from the wealthy and powerful, they seem not to acknowledge that substantial political force would need to be applied to counteract this opposition.

And some of the strategies that they dismiss as ineffectual may be much more effective than they think. They suggest, for example, that a universal basic income might reduce the incentive to seek employment, even though recent research suggests that such a policy not only does not reduce job-seeking, but in addition gives people the opportunity to further their education, gain new skills or contribute to their communities in other ways, rather than just through their jobs. Indeed, President Richard Nixon came very close to enacting a universal basic income in the United States more than 50 years ago. Imagine how much easier it would have been to support people through the economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic if such a policy had been in place today. Indeed, when the COVID-19 pandemic is over, the epidemic of deaths of despair will continue unless we attempt bolder solutions like universal basic income to address it, rather than merely tinkering with things like the minimum wage or the enforcement of antitrust laws.

President Richard Nixon came very close to enacting a universal basic income more than 50 years ago. Imagine how much easier it would have been to support people through the economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic if such a policy had been in place today.
A grand narrative about the narrow corridor of liberty

By Jan Otto Andersson

Economist Daron Acemoglu and political scientist James A. Robinson – authors of the bestseller *Why Nations Fail: Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* – have crowned their earlier achievements by producing a book that is a fascinating read. Using a simple figure with two axes – “power of the state” and “power of society” – they construct a grand narrative using hundreds of anecdotes and stories, starting with Gilgamesh and ending with the Swedish Rehn-Meidner model.

“The narrow corridor” is determined by the balance between the strength of the state and that of society. If the state is too weak, liberty is blocked by “the cage of norms” – or worse, “warre,” an “absent Leviathan” where, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, human life is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” If, on the other hand, the state is too strong in relation to society, it becomes despotic and extractive. Elites enrich themselves by using their control of the state and limit freedom in the society at large. Such a “despotic Leviathan,” the authors write, “silences its citizens, it is impervious to their wishes. It dominates them, maims them, and murders them. It steals the fruit of their labor or helps others do so.”
Only inside the corridor can liberty prosper. Only if the balance between state and society is sustained can “the Red Queen effect” – you must keep on running just to stay in the same place – prevail. The Red Queen effect keeps the state and society in tension, and the concurrence between a stronger and more effective state and a better organized and trusting society “becomes an instrument for the political and social development of society, for the blossoming of civic engagement, institutions and capabilities, for the dismantling of the cage of norms, and for economic prosperity.”

As the state strengthens and takes on ever more demanding tasks, society must reinforce itself to keep the Leviathan shackled. A “shackled Leviathan” that allows the Red Queen effect is the way to increase prosperity in the long run. In terms of the story Acemoglu and Robinson told in Why Nations Fail, where they distinguished between “extractive” and “inclusive” growth, inclusive growth is maintained thanks to a shackled Leviathan. If society is unable to check Leviathan, the country will leave the corridor and gradually turn tyrannical. Economic growth becomes “despotic” and “extractive.” On the other hand, if the state is unable to sufficiently control society and grinds down into a “paper Leviathan,” lawlessness and anarchy arise, resulting in loss of both liberty and prosperity.

As can be seen from this sketchy introduction, Acemoglu and Robinson bring to their narrative a range of vivid new concepts. The authors hardly bother to define or describe them by other means than numerous examples. China – both imperial and Communist – exemplifies the “despotic Leviathan.” The “absent Leviathan” and “the cage of norms” is first represented by the Tiw, a stateless ethnic group in Nigeria organized by kin relations. Lebanon also counts as an absent Leviathan, but since it formally constitutes a state, it is also a “paper Leviathan” like those of many African countries today.

If the state is too weak, liberty is blocked by “the cage of norms.” If, on the other hand, the state is too strong in relation to society, it becomes despotic and extractive. Elites enrich themselves by using their control of the state and limit freedom in the society at large.
The United Kingdom and United States serve as archetypes to highlight “the narrow corridor”, “the shackled Leviathan” and “the Red Queen effect.” As the authors broaden their narrative, using numerous historical and anthropological cases, they illustrate the various pathways to and from the position of a given country. How can you get into the corridor? What can lead you to tumble out of it? What factors determine the breadth of the corridor? Bringing these together, they address the question of how globalization is affecting the fate of liberal democracy.

The Narrow Corridor seldom engages with earlier theories and scholars. The only identified inspiration comes from Thomas Hobbes and Friedrich von Hayek, each pulling in a different direction. Hobbes saw the importance of a strong state but missed the importance of a vibrant civil society. Hayek noted the necessity of a state but feared its strengthening even as it developed new means to enhance people’s life and liberty. The authors write,

*Hayek’s astute analysis misses a vital force – the Red Queen effect. The only option of society against an expanding state capacity is not to rein it back completely. It can alternatively increase its own capacity, its own checks over the state. That is what happened in Britain and in most of Europe in the decades following World War II.*

Acemoglu and Robinson avoid the conventional capitalism/socialism dichotomy. They also avoid referring to Adam Smith or Karl Marx. Instead, they draw attention to the work of lesser-known authorities from earlier times such as the Arab medieval scholar Ibn Khaldun, the Chinese philosopher and political adviser Shang Yang, born in 390 BCE, and the Indian political adviser Kautilya, who around 324 BCE wrote *Arthashastra*, a treatise on statecraft and the duties of the four main castes. These authorities’ works still contribute to keeping three grand civilizations outside the corridor: the Arab lands suffer from “the cycle of despotism”; China endures the “legalist model” according to which order is to be achieved by an all-powerful ruler; India is held back by “the caged economy of caste.”

Among the stories of countries inside and outside the corridor there are some fascinating contrasts between pairs of neighbours. On one side we have Costa Rica, democratic, demilitarized and prosperous, and on the other Guatemala, brutal, violent and corrupt. The original difference between them was the way coffee production was organized. In Costa
Rica small holders were dominant, while in Guatemala the *finca*, estates reminiscent of the old *encomienda* system,\(^1\) prevailed. Another pair is Poland and Russia after the shock treatment in the 1990s. Poland managed to get into the corridor, while Russia did not, despite the weakening of state power. A third historically interesting couple is the Swiss Confederation and Brandenburg-Prussia, both of which had to respond to threats from stronger neighbours. In creating its citizen-based defence capacity, Switzerland became a federation and moved into the corridor, whereas aggressive militarization pushed Brandenburg out of the corridor and its successor, Prussia, “rapidly progressed along the despotic path.”

The impact of the position of labour on the shape of the corridor is exemplified by the differences between South Africa and Zimbabwe. The existence of wage labour relations in the South African industrial sector ultimately helped bring about a compromise between the races, whereas Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe had only mines and farms, which were dependent on coerced labour.

The historical sequence of countries entering the corridor and taking advantage of the Red Queen effect, advancing liberty and economic prosperity, starts with Athens, in the constitutions of Solon and Cleisthenes:

> *Athens gradually ... built one of the world’s first Shackled Leviathans, a powerful, capable state effectively controlled by its citizens ... The state could not dominate society, but society could not dominate the state either; progress by each was met with resistance and innovation by the other, and society’s shackles enabled the state to expand its remit and capacity into new areas ... To shackle a Leviathan, society needs to cooperate, organize collectively, and take up political participation. That’s hard to do if it’s divided into pawns and their masters, phratries, tribes, or kinship groups. The reforms of Solon and Cleisthenes gradually eliminated these competing identities and made room for a broader axis of cooperation. This is a feature we’ll see time and time again in the creation of Shackled Leviathans.*

In Athens, ostracism was a key means of restraining the political dominance of powerful individuals. Good government and the Red Queen appear anew in the city-states of northern Italy, where the notion of commune emerged gradually as citizens began to challenge and overthrow their ecclesiastical...
and aristocratic authorities. Modena, Turin, Cremona, Treviso and Brescia revolted in the 10th century; Pisa, Siena, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Pavia, Bergamo and Bologna in the 11th.

On the walls of Sala dei Nove in Palazzo Pubblico at the famous Piazza del Campo in Siena are three frescoes commissioned by “the Nine,” Siena’s governors – Allegory of Good Government, Effects of Good Government and the gruesome Allegory of Bad Government. These frescoes beguile the authors, who analyze their symbolism over several fascinating pages accompanied by pictures. The story continues with the social and technological innovations that characterized this period, from the adoption of the Arabic numeral system and the invention of spectacles and mechanical clocks to the advent of double-entry bookkeeping and joint-stock companies. In an anecdote about how St. Francis got his name, the reader is taken from Assisi in Italy to the Champagne fairs in northern France.

Acemoglu and Robinson single out what they call “the European Scissors” – the combination of Roman state administration and the assembly politics of the Germanic tribes, in particular the Lombards in Italy and the Franks in western Europe. Among the various theories as to why it was western Europe that led the way into the corridor, it is this “scissors” effect that they find decisive. France, the Low Countries, Germany and Scandinavia entered the narrow corridor and remained there and prospered thanks to the Red Queen effect. So too did England, the story of which is told from the Norman Conquest in 1066 and the Magna Carta in 1215, with a focus on the evolution of one village, Swallowfield, as well that of the English Parliament.

The story then moves to the other side of the Atlantic, where another narrative in which successful development is seen as taking place within the narrow corridor unfolds. But it is a development challenged by slavery and racism. Like most chapters, it begins with a dramatic anecdote, in this case the killing of a black man by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. A central theme in the book is how liberty for important groups – blacks, “untouchables,” women – has been restrained, with disturbing consequences for the whole society. The authors see the challenges faced today by the United States – and the West in general – as worrisome, pointing to “unshared prosperity”, “unhinged Wall Street” and “supersized firms,” with their implications in the form of deepening inequality. Such inequality combined with lost economic dynamism results in a loss of trust in democratic institutions, in both the state and civil society.

The hero at the end of this grand narrative is Swedish social democracy and its tradeoff among workers, peasants and industrialists. After the Great Depression, in the words of the authors, Sweden embarked on a road that became “an iconic example of the simultaneous expansion of the state’s and society’s capacities powered by the Red Queen effect.”

Overall, I found the argument convincing, and appreciated the quality of the writing. The rapid shifts from individual experiences to societies and histories distant in time and space, and from ancient myths to today’s problems, catch the reader’s imagination. It is hard to believe that academic economists have written such a book: not a single mathematical formula, not one statistical table, only the
repeated simple figure with the narrow corridor and arrows that point the way societies have developed outside or inside and into or out of the corridor. There are no references in the text, but each chapter is supported by an extensive bibliographical essay at the end of the book. The reference list, in quite small type, stretches over 32 pages.

Was I disappointed that *The Narrow Corridor* contained little theoretical pondering, that it was mute on how to empirically gauge the two crucial power-variables or the advance of liberty and prosperity? Not really. The value and importance of the narrative gradually emerged through the cascade of different cases.

However, the book does have omissions that bother me. What about the role of nationalism and imperialism? Even though the authors maintain that (capitalist) globalization will tend to broaden the corridor, I am afraid that it hurts the power of both the state and society, making it more likely that a country might fall out of the corridor. I also missed a deeper discussion of the ecological aspects. The existence of an unequal exchange between countries, in terms of labour efforts and ecological sustainability, assist the strong ones to stay inside the corridor.

The authors also leave the question of what to do if you are far from the narrow corridor. If the state is too strong (China) or too weak (India) in relation to society, Acemoglu and Robinson see it in simple negative terms. A strong state, however, has the option of delivering basic education and health services and eliminating mass poverty. This option could be foreclosed if it tried to get into the corridor by giving “society” more influence. The fear that religious traditionalists, regional independence movements, rebellious youth and maybe external destabilization could cause chaos and armed conflicts is real. Half of today’s Russians think the best period was that of Brezhnevite stagnation, whereas Boris Yeltsin’s rule in the 1990s is rated best by only 1 per cent.

On the other side, if a state aggressively starts to reform a society governed by strong norms and traditions (Kemalist Turkey), the result may either be an oppressive state or a weakened one, leaving the country even further away from the Red Queen effect and liberty.

The book is an effort to explain the road we have travelled, not to find solutions to our current problems. It will be put to the test in the coming years. Is China’s miraculous growth – called “despotic” by the authors – doomed to failure? Will India preserve its democracy with a state that is too weak to overcome the “cage of norms” attached to the caste system? Will the European Union be able to enter the narrow corridor, and what if it fails? Can the United States keep from sliding down the slippery slope toward the edge of the corridor? There will be a lot of serious discussions and new research emanating from this captivating work.

Note

1 The Spanish system that rewarded conquerors with the labour of particular groups of subject people, applied during the Spanish colonization of the Americas and the Philippines. Conquered peoples were considered vassals of the Spanish monarch. The crown awarded an encomienda as a grant to a particular individual. In the conquest era of the 16th century, a grant was considered a monopoly on the labour of particular groups
Is alcoholism First Nations’ key dysfunction?

By John Richards

Harold Johnson is a member of the Montreal Lake Cree Nation in northern Saskatchewan, son of a Cree mother and a Swedish father (who assimilated into Cree culture). He has lived a very full life. Before pursuing his present “job” as both fiction and nonfiction writer, he undertook many careers. In his youth, he was a logger, miner, trapper and fisher. He joined the navy; later he decided to be a lawyer and got a law degree from the University of Saskatchewan, and subsequently a master’s degree in law from Harvard. For two decades he was a senior crown prosecutor in northern Saskatchewan. He insists on describing himself as “Indian” as opposed to other labels, and enters into the debate over the origin of the word (Columbus’s confusion as to where he landed in 1492 vs. evolution of the Spanish in Dios – with God). Currently, he lives “off grid” with his wife, near his family home.

I was aware of this book, but did not read it until recently. It deserves a review in Inroads, even if four years late. Incidentally, Firewater was shortlisted in 2016 for a Governor General’s literary award.

Johnson’s thesis is straightforward: alcoholism is the key dysfunction in First Nation communities. To date, he concludes, the Canadian elite – both Native and non-Native – has avoided discussion of its seriousness. In discussing the 1996 report of the Royal Commission...
on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), he writes that alcoholism “was too blatant a subject to ignore … The commissioners argued back and forth about this study and that study and which might be correct … They said, ‘the widely held belief that most Aboriginal people consume excessive amounts of alcohol on a regular basis appears to be incorrect.’” Johnson’s response: “The Royal Commission obviously got it wrong.”

From his experience as crown prosecutor he describes many harrowing cases involving alcohol. To give a sample:

_I know a young man from a community near here who had a girl friend. The two of them were having a few relationship problems and had walked away from the community … They were standing on the bridge consuming alcohol. The girl decided to punish the young man by committing suicide – she jumped in front of a semi-truck that was passing by just then. The young man was devastated and confused … The experience haunted him, and he went to talk to an aunt for advice. She told him, “Go get good and drunk and let it go.” … He drank as much as he could for as long as he could. He woke up one morning in his car. The police were knocking on the window. They were investigating a hit and run._

_They found the victim’s DNA under the young man’s car. Sometimes during the night he had run over his cousin and killed him … At that moment, he quit drinking. Trauma, grief and drinking seem to go together in our communities._

Is this case representative? There is no definitive evidence on the prevalence of abuse of alcohol in First Nation communities and the extent of negative consequences. Johnson thinks the case studies he raises are representative; I agree with him. There is also a great deal of anecdotal evidence. Johnson refers to conversations with police, probation officers, judges and a forensic anthropologist, and personal experience with Indigenous friends, primarily those who do not drink. He cites the indirect evidence arising from coroners’ reports of proximate causes of death in northern Saskatchewan, where roughly two thirds of the population is First Nation. In the north, the leading cause of death between 1998 and 2007 was “injury” (at 23 per cent). In the province overall, “injury” was far less prevalent (at 6 per cent), and would have been lower yet (at 4 per cent) were the north excluded.

“Injury” (which includes suicide) is one of a dozen standard causes of death listed in coroners’ reports. It is, admittedly, an ambiguous residual category. One of the few
comprehensive studies to make use of “injury” statistics is a study nearly two decades old, undertaken by the First Nations and Inuit branch of Health Canada. This study analyzed the difference in distributions of proximate causes of death between on-reserve First Nation and non-Indigenous Canadians. The study used the concept of potential years of life lost, a measure that accords a higher weight to death at early ages. The overwhelming difference between causes of death in the two populations is the dramatically higher importance of “injury” among First Nation relative to non-Indigenous Canadians. To my knowledge, no subsequent comprehensive study has been undertaken.

As evidence that non-Indigenous elites are also unwilling to address alcoholism, here is the conclusion of a (highly negative) review of Firewater in Quill & Quire, a representative organ of respectable literary opinion in Canada: “Johnson’s basic argument – that alcohol is killing so many indigenous people – is flawed from the start ... He offers no supporting research, no police reports, coroner reports, or medical records, to back up his claim.”

Johnson has pursued many careers, but statistician is not one of them. He realizes, as does the author of the Quill & Quire review, the need for better statistical evidence. He describes in some detail an unsuccessful attempt to persuade a statistically competent colleague to research evidence on the role of alcohol among First Nation people in Saskatchewan:

I wanted to find out many things. How many deaths were the direct results of alcohol? What percentage of accidents? How many cancers? How many heart attacks? How many suicides? Could he determine how much shorter a child’s life would be because the parents were drinking and not providing proper nourishment during the child’s formative years? What is the cost to society for one child with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) during that child’s life?

Johnson rejects various explanations that make deterministic arguments based on historical wrongs: “If we believe that the only reasons for our problems rest with colonization, we can never fix our problems, because we cannot go back and fix colonization. We cannot go back and change residential schools.” His tentative short-term solution turns around “sober houses”:

If you have a sober house, if you are one of the 35% of our people who never use alcohol, you put a Sober House sign on your door and people will know that you welcome sober people to come and join you ... A safe place, a cup of tea, someone to talk to, some who understand: the experience of what a healthy life and a healthy home look like would be, for

The overwhelming difference between causes of death in the two populations is the dramatically higher importance of “injury” among First Nation relative to non-Indigenous Canadians.
many of our relatives, something superior to any treatment centre.

“Sober houses” may be a weak reed on which to rely. Johnson has much more to say than advocacy for sober houses. He hopes that a cultural revival of Indigenous values will restore community health.

In thinking about potential policy to realize reconciliation, I have been influenced by the late Allan Blakeney, a politician much ahead of his time in his concern about the condition of the Indigenous population. Many would now dismiss as inadequate his attempt as Premier in the 1970s to create Native-run municipal governments throughout northern Saskatchewan. At the time, they were valuable innovations. Given Blakeney’s longstanding engagement, Brian Mulroney appointed him to RCAP as a commissioner. Prior to publication of the report, Blakeney resigned. Why, I asked him? I take the liberty of summarizing here his response in a personal conversation:

In my opinion, roughly a quarter of those who identify as Indian or First Nation truly want a communal lifestyle available on self-governing reserves, and that should be acknowledged and respected. Another quarter are reasonably well integrated in mainstream Canadian society. The half in the middle are migrating between reserve and town and facing many difficulties in both contexts. For two years, I travelled with other RCAP commissioners across Canada and could never generate a serious discussion about education and employment. My frustration was such that, finally, I thought it preferable to resign.

Blakeney placed more emphasis than Johnson does on formal education and employment, and the desirability of most – not all, but most – “Indians” opting to go to town. Maybe Johnson is right, and Blakeney wrong. Whatever the ultimate explanation of excess Native death by “injury,” Johnson makes a very convincing case that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous elites are ignoring a fundamental social scourge.

Notes

1 A Statistical Profile on the Health of First Nations in Canada (Ottawa: Health Canada, 2003), retrieved from http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnhb
2 Wayne Arthurson, review, Quill & Quire, January 2017, retrieved from https://quillandquire.com/review/firewater-how-alcohol-is-killing-my-people-and-yours/
In the recent Delhi state election, the AAP, a reform party that has championed school improvements, trounced both of India’s main national parties. Atishi, a newly elected AAP legislator, is the most prominent public figure associated with Delhi school reforms.

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