

It's Blackfly Time!
by Marni Jackson

THE WALRUS

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National Dreams...

That Canada be united by a vigorous Ottawa; that we build great cities; that we recognize America for the rough beast that it is.

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Alan Broadbent on our cities
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National Affairs

A House Half Built

A former premier argues that Canada must return to its nation-building roots

by Roy J. Romanow
 photography by Liz Cowie



There have been two moments in my life when I have felt truly concerned about the future of Canada. Then and now.

On the night of the 1995 Quebec referendum, I participated in a live television panel in Montreal. As the results poured in and the nation swept back and forth between apprehension and hope, I tried to suppress a gut-wrenching feeling that all might be lost. The final tally, narrow as it was, meant that Canada could renew its commitment to federalism and national unity. That was then.

Now, my anxiety is occasioned not by the drama of one critical evening, nor by the potential loss of a province that contributes so much to what makes Canada unique and distinct, but by the erosion of this country's legacy and values, and by the growing assault on policies based on that legacy. We are again at a pivotal moment in our history and, frankly, many more of us need to stand up for a country based on fairness, opportunity, respect, and balance between the individual and society. The current political culture

militates against visionary leadership and active citizen participation, but if Canada is to remain progressive, united, and strong enough to meet tomorrow's challenges, it must change course.

At stake is the legacy of a century of nation-builders and the cornerstone of the Canadian idea: that our social contract is one of shared destiny. Historical accounts vary, but the least biased agree that the dominant cultures share a destiny with aboriginal peoples, that Quebec and English Canada are more similar than different, and that our cities and rural communities are not at odds with each other. Our destiny is even intertwined with that of our neighbours to the south. Above all, shared destiny is not some sentimental idea. Rather, it is grounded in history and based on the notion that the sum of Canada is greater than its remarkably diverse parts. Against a backdrop of individual and community proclivities and of divergent belief systems, shared destiny has been accepted as necessary for survival, growth, and what we must do for each other to build an exceptional nation.

This sense of Canadian nationhood wasn't created or recognized overnight. It was slow to evolve, is a work in progress, and is not without blemishes. A look in the rear-view mirror shows the difficulties and imperfections of our journey. The imposition of a head tax on Chinese immigrants and the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II are two tragic examples. Our recurring promises to make good on commitments to aboriginal peoples remain unfulfilled. There are many other instances of error and unfinished business. Still, informed by the realization that by working together we can achieve balance, collaboration, and a more evolved sense of inclusion and rights, we have created a more equitable society.

Canada is a work in progress that must be guided by a clear understanding of our past and a determination to build upon it. The land Jacques Cartier discovered almost 500 years ago was one of the most diverse on earth. The continent was home to more nations than Europe has today, over fifty languages, and was a vast archipelago of

cultures, religions, and social systems. We did not invent multiculturalism, we joined it in progress. A clash of empires planted English and French settlers alongside each other in an uneasy duality. Two rival nationalities—which had spent centuries fighting each other elsewhere—were here obliged to coexist and to develop a civil society.

Fate cast us with a different alchemy, one where our political culture was based on achieving a delicate equilibrium. While civility was at times grudging, it nonetheless took hold, and the

to find a land of peace and a future for their children. And more recently, others from South Asia, then Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere have sought to find fairness and opportunity in Canada.

I often think of my father, who left Ukraine in the late 1920s in pursuit of liberty and hope; it's a story told over and over in Canadian history. His timing was not the best as the prairie soil was soon devastated by droughts, which, in turn, severely worsened the

province and province to nation, and I learned to actively respect cultural and religious differences. The collapse of the global economic system in the 1930s followed by the great mobilization of World War II taught us all that we must act collectively to shape our destiny. And in the ensuing years, as the federal and provincial governments worked together, Canada was further transformed by a demonstrated concern for families, veterans, the unemployed, the elderly, and the sick. We built universities and community col-



pursuit of balance was informed by a new constituent idea: empathy. This meant a transition from passive tolerance to a more active respect and understanding, and a gradual move from regional autonomy and rugged individualism to a careful attention to the needs of the commons.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sir Wilfrid Laurier's proclamation was that the new century would belong to Canada. Although it took at least fifty years for Canada to be noticed for its commitment to fairness, its balance between nation and enterprise, and for its constructive approach to geopolitics, we had long been known around the world as a large and welcoming community.

By the time Laurier was in office, the greatest human migration in our history was underway. They came first from the highland clearances in Scotland, from the famines of Ireland, and from the teeming cities of Britain. From China, Japan, Eastern Europe, Germany, and Iceland also came adventurers—the dispossessed and the dreamers—all firmly determined

impact of the Great Depression. From farmer to labourer, he became a section man for the Canadian National Railway, repairing the lines, carting ice blocks to old boxcars, and clearing huge snowdrifts that blocked the tracks. When my mother and sister finally arrived in Montreal, there to meet them was Mike Romanow, who proudly used his rail pass to accompany them back to their new life in Saskatoon.

The working-class west side of Saskatoon was alive with the sounds, smells, faiths, and faces of other new Canadians. They were primarily Polish, German, Ukrainian, Jewish, Scottish, and English. Tolerance and acceptance were bred into the fibre of our lives. Caring and compassion were almost forced on us, and old-country disputes gave way to a common pursuit of shared opportunities. The Dirty Thirties taught us collaboration. Credit unions, cooperatives, health centres, and crown corporations sprung up as the practical vehicles for immediate survival and for a better future.

As a first-generation Canadian, I saw a unity of purpose connecting town to

leges, and their doors opened widely. We promoted research laboratories and created institutions that nourished the arts and planted the seeds for the golden age of Canadian literature. We funded the CBC and embraced the television age with a uniquely Canadian ethos. We then established our own citizenship act, national anthem, and flag, and introduced social programs like universal hospitalization and medical care that most concretely affirm Canadian communitarian values. By the year of the centennial, as Pierre Berton wrote, Canada had become “a world-class, forward-looking nation.”

After 1967, the tide of progressive reform continued. We went beyond the social and economic foundations of Canadian nationhood and transformed the political and legal framework of the country by affirming the equality of our two official languages, acknowledging the treaty and historic rights of aboriginal peoples, and recognizing the multicultural essence of Canada. Equalization was written into the constitution, echoing the principle that Canadians supported sharing

Fuelled by global trade agreements and, at home, by pressure for more powerful provinces able to implement programs as each sees fit, unbridled competition appears to be the new orthodoxy.

between regions. The constitution was patriated, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was established, and we committed ourselves to equality, diversity, civility, and the pursuit of peace.

This is our history and it resides in our collective DNA.

“Shared destiny” may seem like a romantic notion but it is not. It is

thousand acts of accommodation are the fabric of a nation....”

This point of view speaks to a sovereign nation of citizens with rights and responsibilities, and with a commitment to act in the best interests of the nation as a whole. Stated another way, Canada cannot be defined merely through strict legal interpretations as they apply to federal and provincial

programs as each sees fit, unbridled competition appears to be the new orthodoxy. This potent mix could alter decades of successful national advancement and threaten Canada’s collective prosperity. The Canadian Council of Chief Executives, an influential lobby group that represents Canada’s largest corporations, recently advanced the idea that Ottawa should grant more tax-



central to our national identity and to all political and social progress in Canada. When Peruvian diplomat Javier Perez de Cuellar stepped down as secretary-general of the United Nations in 1991, he donated all the gifts and works of art he had received while in office to Canada, noting he had come to regard it as the kind of civil society the nations of the world should emulate.

One of the best descriptions of shared destiny is found in the few words used by Saskatchewan’s deputy Attorney General, John Whyte, in his oral submission to the Supreme Court of Canada in the post-1995 Quebec secession reference case: “A nation is built when the communities that comprise it make commitments to it, when they forego choices and opportunities on behalf of a nation... when the communities that comprise it make compromises, when they offer each other guarantees, when they make transfers, and perhaps most pointedly, when they receive from others the benefits of national solidarity. The threads of a

jurisdictions. Citizenship, regardless of where one lives, is at the very heart of Canada and our never-ending project of nation-building.

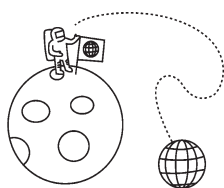
In recent years, there has been a drift away from this legacy. Perhaps the deficits, which ballooned in all of our governments — and resulted in the elimination, amendment, or drastic alteration of social and economic programs — sowed the seeds of doubt about our collective capacity to meet future challenges and balance competing interests. Perhaps the new trading arrangements have ushered in a new globalization of commerce, which has weakened

our resolve to continue the nation-building enterprise. For certain, the soil has been tilled for the sprouting of views at odds with shared destiny, and today there is palpable momentum toward decentralization, individualism, and privatization, all peddled as a means to forge a stronger nation.

Fuelled by global trade agreements and, at home, by pressure for more powerful provinces able to implement

ing powers to the provinces and cease making transfer payments historically used to ensure that national standards for social and economic programs are applied throughout the country. Apart from narrowly defined roles primarily in defence and foreign affairs, what is left for the federal government to do under such a scheme? If the idea is accepted, the things that matter most to Canadians would be turned over to the provinces, lock, stock, and tax points. This, along with recent failures to achieve principled compromises on intergovernmental matters that shape economic and social policy, has resulted in a patchwork quilt of programs unequally applied.

New institutions have been created to reflect these developments. The prime example is the Council of the Federation, a strictly provincial-territorial body. The common denominators in this forum are more federal funds and more freedom to fashion programs that conform to the ideology of a particular regional government. This structure sets up confrontation and devalues collaboration, ignores



our history, and weakens the nation's modern-day purposes. The Council represents provincial and territorial leaders sticking together so they can go their separate ways. Not surprisingly, then, the list of local demands grows. Fiscal imbalance, health care, environmental issues, trade, and equalization are tailored by the council to suit the interests of this region or that. With no federal representatives speaking for Canada as a whole, the country is fast becoming a loose association of semi-autonomous jurisdictions that claim

ensure that matters affecting quality of life are not overlooked.

In *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, John Ralston Saul argues, "Our future was debated and decided as if we had no past." He goes on to describe contemporary Canada in this way: "[W]hile our elites increasingly give themselves over to their myths of globalization... the citizenry seems to be withdrawing into a state of sullen non-cooperation." Why? Because we are repeatedly told that the approaches used to build this country no longer function.

want to join a company, rise in its ranks, and remain loyal to it, you are "old economy." The concept of a company being loyal to its workforce is "old thinking." Our children will not have jobs as we did. Their resumés will feature numerous contract jobs and work done for dozens of different enterprises. They will simply move from place to place.

It is not nostalgia for halcyon days and greener pastures that is causing me to be anxious about our present trajectory. Rather, it is that vast layoffs



to define the nation's needs. The result is a bizarre redefinition of Canadian federalism from one based on greater co-operation to one of greater compartmentalization. The delicate Canadian balance between nation and enterprise, between the individual and community, is imperilled, all under the pretext of building national unity.

Governments must be mandated to base their decisions on the broadest public interest—interests that reflect both provincial and national concerns. Canada should not and cannot be built on what is solely best for one's own jurisdiction or what is best to improve the agendas of the largest of our corporations. I am not against competition. Nor am I opposed to global trading arrangements designed in a balanced and fair manner that are beneficial to us and offer economic and social rights to the citizens of our trading partners. Rather, my concern is that our governments seem to lack the resolve to regulate competition where the national interest requires it, to guarantee that trade is reciprocal, and to

Since the 1980s, there has been a gravitational pull to the monetarist school of economics, with its near-total faith in the wisdom of the market. Under this model, the federal government is not characterized as an instrument of nation-building, but rather as an impediment to the natural needs of the market. As trade and commerce became increasingly transnational, the idea of a strong national government (and a mixed private-public economy) lost currency. Profit, not human prosperity, is now declared to be our primary national purpose, and efforts to mitigate the worst consequences of global trade and competition are muted or non-existent. Facilitated by computers and the Internet, through just-in-time delivery systems and other magic machines, business has gone global, the argument goes, and our society must adapt to the needs, values, and realities of the global marketplace. We are made to feel parochial for even thinking about national identity or protecting our institutions.

Values once fundamental to our working lives have corroded. If you

are now the rule at many corporations seeking labour in emerging nations where they are not financially burdened by unions, fair wages, or environmental regulations.

Of course global trade can provide important economic opportunities and has the potential to yield a global conscience that takes collective responsibility for environments both ecological and social. Our commercial and cultural goods now reach the world. In return, we are enriched by other cultures. This was meant to be the promise of the new global community, but instead of serving people by empowering them and their societies, the global economy is becoming a race to the bottom, a race that replaces diversity with homogenization.

There are many examples where the negative consequences of intense domestic and global competition coupled with decentralization have affected the things that matter most to us. We have abandoned, for instance, the democratic promise that higher education would be accessible to all. While undergraduate programs are starved of resources,

Understandably, there are different views regarding the core of our national soul. Some have always believed that individualism should form the basis of our society. I disagree.

business and law schools aggressively compete with each other and provide premium education at premium prices. Across the board, social services are atrophying and user fees are becoming the norm. While part of this trend was triggered by the economic adversity of the late 1980s and the fiscal realities of the “new economy” that followed, the reasons for this drift don’t

ed poverty, only to re-emerge in shocking spectacles like the November 2005 evacuation of over 1,000 Kashechewan residents after an outbreak of E. coli in the water at their James Bay reserve.

The question is, do we now accept that a legacy of shared destiny is not sustainable—that, in the end, people have to make their own way?

of them highly skilled and educated, who confront accrediting bodies that ignore their experience and credentials? That so many immigrant children face a lack of critical second-language support is unpardonable. It’s no wonder that dropout rates for ESL learners are more than double the high-school average.

Understandably, there are different



lie there alone. In fact, most of the attrition in Canada’s social infrastructure took place during a period of sustained economic growth. What is the result?

Despite prosperous times and encouraging employment figures from Statistics Canada, clawbacks in social services have contributed to a growing gap between rich and poor, and the number of low-wage, insecure jobs is growing. The richest 10 percent of Canadians now own and control 53 percent of the country’s wealth; more than one million children live below the pre-tax low-income cut-off, and there is more child poverty today than in 1989, when the House of Commons committed to ending it by the turn of the century.

And then there’s that one enduring shame that haunts our progress as a nation: unfulfilled treaty obligations. Aboriginal peoples in Canada are facing unacceptable living conditions, joblessness, and a disgraceful life-expectancy rate. Promises have been made—solemn each and every one—but the pledges remain largely unfulfilled. A vital part of our legacy is being rendered invisible, lost in isolat-

As recent evidence suggests, government transparency has been replaced by closed-door negotiations, with the public excluded from debate and denied information on who is responsible for decisions that affect us all. Who decided that our children would drown in debt after they leave university? (Half of our university graduates leave school with student debts of over \$20,000.) Art, music, and physical education programs at many public schools are now funded through bake sales, or not at all. In 2005, almost one-third of Canadians reported that they, a family member, or a friend could not find a family doctor. How do these things happen? The polling firm Ipsos Reid reports that 73 percent of us believe that Canadian content in the media and the arts is crucial for maintaining national and cultural identity, and yet fewer and fewer Canadian productions get the support they need to tell our stories. And who decides that gun control is the primary issue underpinning youth violence, rather than the forces of hopelessness?

And what of new Canadians, many

views regarding the core of our national soul; our democracy should foster principled debate. Some have always believed that individualism should form the basis of our society. I disagree, but the greater concern is the diminishing opportunities for open and honest debate due to media concentration and the shutting down of public discourse. It might sound trite to say so, but for our democracy to be revitalized, frank and open discussion must be made the order of the day.

The late Wallace Stegner, who wrote so movingly about the prairie West, noted, “If we don’t know where we are, we don’t know who we are.” For those of us who came of age in prairie communities, our lives will always bear the stamp of locality. The harsh, often snow-blown conditions, droughts, distance, and isolation forced us together, like poplar trees huddled on a wind-swept plain. We learned to see survival as a test of our ability to organize and to remain united. This sense of belonging and sharing must become as true for Canada today as it was when this land was settled by the Mike Romanows of

the world. As they fanned out across the country, they were keenly aware that they were Canadian, part of something larger. And today progress similarly depends on newcomers seeing themselves as connected to something beyond their respective communities.

The persistent question for our national and local communities is how best to embrace the challenges constantly appearing on our doorstep. One answer, surely, is that innovation arises not solely from competition, but also from analyzing (and cherishing) what

US by boldly developing new markets. At the same time, we must dramatically increase the size and vigour of Canadian businesses and, partly to protect the country from global recessions, expand Canada's internal markets. And this must be done in the context of advancing workers' rights, ensuring that a forty-hour workweek provides a decent wage, improving our natural environment, and demanding that the political rights of those who live in the lands of our trading partners are respected.

The income-security system, one of

Similarly, supporting Canada's unique cultural identity through what we see on television, hear on radio, and read in newspapers, magazines, and books, will produce genuine dividends. It's time to restore our cultural sovereignty over the airwaves through generous investments in the arts and in broadcasting; and it is time to affirm the democratic commons and bring legislative remedy to the unacceptable concentration of media in the hands of a few.

International prominence comes



we owe each other and what we have in common. The pooling and sharing of resources does not mean sacrificing individual freedoms and differences. Quite the opposite; our history suggests that such actions bring uniqueness to life. Focusing on this tradition will foster optimism. Canada remains a deeply exciting country rich in opportunities. But building on this positive legacy requires us to reinvigorate our sense of shared destiny and our commitment to the common good.

An agenda for a renewed national purpose requires a return to cooperative federalism as the vehicle to solve Canada's major problems. Our leaders — governmental, corporate, and community — must be guided by the overarching principle of what the national good demands, and solutions to challenging issues must be openly debated.

This agenda could also encompass a made-in-Canada economic strategy that provides short-term financial opportunity and longer-term prosperity, and that lessens our dependence on the

Canada's social-justice hallmarks, is in trouble. We must modernize it and reinvest in it. Similarly, the country can afford a national affordable-housing program and universal child care, and to at last honour the rights of aboriginal peoples to healthy lives, equal opportunity, and a share in the country's bounty. A renaissance in education and research and increasing access to university and college by lessening the financial burden would spur economic development and innovation.

In health care, the provinces need to do the heavy lifting involved in properly re-engineering the universal system: using new money to buy real change, developing effective programs on disease prevention and well-being, providing for independent auditing, and telling their electorates that it will take seven years to achieve these goals, not seven months. Playing around with private-delivery health-care options is the default position of those governments that have not had the courage to innovate within the public model.

not just from enterprising businesses. Canada should recapture its reputation as a world leader in building peace and sharing prosperity through our international objectives. It is unimaginable how far we have slipped. Canada's foreign-aid spending, for example, is a national embarrassment. And imagine a bold and dramatic national environmental initiative to restore our damaged biosphere. Imagine corporate- and government-sponsored research dedicated to making Canada a world leader in environmentally sensitive new technologies.

I can hear the protests and rebuttals to this modest down payment on a better Canada: "Cost. What would all this cost?" It is a reasonable, albeit predictable, question, but the fiscal capacity necessary to achieve our shared destiny is well within our reach. Just look at accumulated federal surpluses; just look at the rising trend in corporate tax benefits. We must demand investment. After all, isn't it a fact that a progressive society is shouldered on the foundations



I was a premier once. I know the pressures that militate against taking the longer view of things and of reaching beyond one's particular place. It requires a commitment to a progressive society.

of a progressive tax system and progressive social policies?

A political society is always a work in progress susceptible to failure and instability. But Canada has a legacy that provides it with a compass, a story that should allow it to navigate its future course with confidence and grace. If we become gripped with amnesia and

of the state is not to ensure that basic needs are met, but rather to firmly establish the ethic of unfettered competition throughout society. It tells us that the real purpose of political activity is not to create the national good; that the idea of public good must concede to the empty shibboleth of insatiable profitability, and the blind and unsubstantiated belief that unregulated pri-

ity. Meeting this challenge requires supplanting the new nationalism that stands in stark contrast to the values and vision that created Canada's strong communities and gave us international standing as a good nation.

I was a premier once. I know the pressures that militate against taking the longer view of things and of reaching beyond one's particular place. It's



pretend we don't have that narrative, we will lurch about creating only the illusion of national progress. There is a danger today that Canadian nationalism—the sense that we have achieved something valuable and unique by building a good state out of a vast geography and great diversity—is being replaced by the conventional wisdom of transnationalism, whose first tenet is that nothing really matters. Not differences, not culture, not simple humanity...not the specific narrative that has defined Canada.

Where does this danger come from? It may come from a strongly held belief in personal liberty. However, when we observe what completely open markets and convenient politics actually bring to society—namely poverty, exploitation, instability, dislocation, and loss of identity—it must be acknowledged that this conventional wisdom presents itself as a nightmare. In truth, while it masquerades otherwise, its actual purpose is simply to reduce the transaction costs of the global marketplace.

In Canada, this “new nationalism” leads us to believe that the highest goal

vate ownership alone is always more efficient and more effective than any mixed economy could possibly be.

It is further argued that collateral damage to society is an unavoidable cost. The new nationalism tells us that we can't hope to preserve our grand compromises, which respect differences and develop national purpose; that identity has no boundaries, and that the social capacity of minority groups is of little importance. It is this thoughtlessness about the true relationship between state and identity that made that referendum evening in 1995 so bleak, so devoid of historical appreciation.

The new nationalism accepts that social divisions are inescapable and a tolerable result of our quest for efficiency, even though through such divisions we lay the groundwork for even greater inefficiencies due to unrest, instability, and exclusion. In other words, the new nationalism is a trap that carries only the veneer of worldliness.

At the very core of Canada's challenge today is the rediscovery of our shared legacy as a political society that dares to include and to promote equal-

not easy and it requires, among other things, a commitment to a progressive society. Though it can be difficult to find, more than ever we need leadership that is informed by shared destiny. Sometimes, too many of us fail to grasp the fragility of our hard-earned success, our basic goodness. Now is the time to recapture the moral and political strength to see ourselves in our own place, in our own time, informed by our own values, and within our own actual narrative, as an independent nation, worthy of the respect of a world that needs an even better Canada. ‡

The Hon. Roy J. Romanow was premier of Saskatchewan from November 1991 to February 2001 and the commissioner on the Future of Health Care in Canada. He is a senior fellow at the University of Saskatchewan and a fellow at the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

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THE WALRUS

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