

SAYOUT

Spring

Dealing with our serious deficit

Canada's "infrastructure deficit" continues to grow. Our bridges, roads, hospitals, tunnels, sewage systems, water distribution systems, and other public structures are not being maintained sufficiently to keep them in a good state of repair.



In manufacturing settings two fundamental approaches to maintenance can apply. Breakdown maintenance or preventive maintenance. Generally, for good production purposes, preventive maintenance is the preferred approach.

When breakdown maintenance (if it ain't broke, don't fix it) is in vogue, the breakdowns that do occur

tend to have major consequences. Production can be interrupted, even halted, and heavy costs incurred while repairs are carried out.

Good preventive maintenance dramatically lessens the possibility of breakdowns and reduces costs.

What applies to productivity in the manufacturing sector applies to our public infrastructure as well. A weakened or fallen bridge disrupts traffic, delays critical deliveries, and generally impacts the economy as a whole. Poorly maintained water distribution systems can result in large-scale outbreaks of illnesses, even deaths, with consequent costs to society and the economy.

Present estimates place Canada's infrastructure deficit at between \$350-billion and \$400-billion. We face fundamental questions here: How and when will we pay off this deficit? Do we even intend to try?

Right now it seems we're simply doing a little bit of maintenance now and then and hoping for the best. Does this make sense? Are we content to do little and simply let things crumble and fall apart around us?



What are we building for tomorrow?

The good society

Is it possible for us to build a good society, one that benefits everyone, not just some?

To hear the bellows of those who believe in "survival of the fittest", it would seem that a good society is just not possible. Greed will out. And greed is not compatible with good.

Still, despite the widespread scorn for the idea, many people believe a good society is possible. But most of these believers think that a good society is not achievable with a laissez-faire approach to economics or social well-being. Just letting the market decide does not give much of a voice to society itself.

Despite the seeming promise of "social responsibility" by corporations, the private sector does not seem capable of building a good society. After all, private business people have had many centuries now in which to prove their capability for serving the public good. They serve their friends and their moneyed customers, but not the whole of society. There are simply too many people who are not profitable in the corporate world view.

Perhaps the time is right for us to believe in something better. Sometimes belief is all that's needed.

Most imperial modern nation

"Extreme inequality is the surest indicator of a society organized by the dominator relationships of Empire. It is no coincidence that the United States has the most unequal wealth distribution of any major industrialized nation and is the most imperial of modern nations."

David C. Korten
The Great Turning, 2006

Listening with empathy

Empathic listening is fully attentive listening. It is open, comfortable, and fully engaged with what someone is saying. The listener does not cut the other person off or interrupt with his or her own thoughts. Empathic listening works to achieve full understanding of what is being conveyed. Imagine if we were all empathic listeners! We would live in a different world!

Goldfingers at work

Many authors have written books in which they've spun plots involving nefarious evil people who plotted to take over the world. Ian Fleming's "Goldfinger" involved such a plot. James Bond, of course, came to the rescue and foiled Goldfinger in brilliant fashion.

What we don't hear that much about today is that a small group of rich and powerful people have indeed taken over dominance of the world. Something less than a thousand people now control the greater part of the world's wealth. Instead of one Goldfinger, we now have a group of Goldfingers. And they are real, not fictional. James Bond is nowhere in sight.

Politicians in Canada often talk in near-mystical terms about "investors". We are told repeatedly that investors must not be frightened off. After all, if these fabled beings withdraw their money, whole economies could collapse. Many of these investors are the Goldfingers. Using financial institutions of various kinds, transnational corporations, or large hedge funds or pension funds, they can direct the affairs of nations around the world.

Thomas Piketty notes in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*: "Private wealth rests on public poverty" Might investors actually promote poverty?

Individual nations challenge the power of the global super rich at their peril. Presidents and prime ministers are acutely aware of this. Investments can dry up, large-scale cash withdrawals can occur, currencies can be trashed, and loans can become unavailable.

Presidents and prime ministers can see their governments collapse as their economies collapse. Understandably, they generally shy away from confronting or seeming to confront such power. Instead, they talk incessantly about the need to keep investors happy and to build properly competitive economies — in other words they talk about placating the global Goldfingers.

Sadly, when the Goldfingers are satisfied, ordinary people are often left deeply dissatisfied. The richness of the few does depend, it seems, on the dis-possession and poverty of the many.

Energy for you

The word "energy" has gone through some interesting changes in the past few years. Unfortunately, these changes may be limiting our thinking in subtle ways.

Too often, we hear of "energy" only in connection with oil and gas. So financial commentators will talk about "energy stocks" when they refer to oil and gas stocks. Over time this gradually creates the impression that oil and gas are our only real energy sources. This can slowly build a kind of miasmic effect on the public mind.

If we pause to think about it, we know that energy sources other than oil and gas do exist. Moving water, wind, nuclear, solar, and geothermal sources are available. These too could be included under the heading of "energy".

Different energy sources can come into use for generating electricity, a dynamic, powerful, and flexible source of power in our world.

Some jurisdictions, such as Ontario, have gone to great expense to get rid of coal-fired generating stations. Yet such stations persist in large numbers in other jurisdictions such as in the state of Ohio.

Some commentators note that the Koch brothers whose wealth depends heavily on fossil fuels, have actively campaigned to promote the increasing use of coal and oil to meet our energy needs. And the brothers are not alone in their efforts. The money flowing to the campaign coffers of coal- and oil-friendly politicians has increased accordingly.

When we become too tightly focused in our language about energy, we close ourselves off from possibilities that lie beyond traditional fossil fuels. Those possibilities are real, and they just might help us move into a better, more environmentally-friendly world.

The next time you hear people talking about energy when they're referring to oil or gas, keep in mind the fuller meaning of this word and remember that "energy" describes a much broader range of possibilities. And that broader range of possibilities connects directly with our energy future.



I'll strut if I want to

Harming with cuts

... poorly conceived spending reductions often do more harm than good. Postponing highway repairs actually increases future deficits, because costs escalate so rapidly when maintenance is deferred.

Robert H. Frank
The Darwin Economy, 2011

Be prepared

Being prepared is a good idea for everyone these days. The world is a restless place, full of surprises. Are you ready for the next storm? The next flood? The next financial upheaval?

Sayout

Sayout gives voice to those concerned about where we are in today's world and where we're headed. Here we can talk about issues affecting us right now—in Canada and around the world.

Agree or disagree, but *think*. What is really happening, and what do we need to do? Ask questions of those in power, demand action where it's needed, and don't be misled by saccharine promises or golden phrases meant to soothe, but nothing more..

E-versions of this newsletter are available for free. You just have to ask. No selling, no hassles!

Contact Robyn Peterson at:
petersonwrite@hotmail.com

How can we help?

We see a heart-wrenching picture of a young child in a desolate location. The child is obviously poor and looks at us with the saddest eyes. How could we not feel the need to reach out and comfort her?

A gentle voice tells us that this child lives in a precarious situation. Her mother is dying and she will soon be all alone. We feel the urge to cry, to reach out and give her hope somehow. Something must be done. A solution is available!

We hear the gentle voice urging us to contribute monthly to a specified charity. We are assured that children like this little girl will receive our money and that it will make an enormous difference. We must call in and donate money to this charity organization – now!

Emotionally we are touched and may well contribute. But what do we contribute to? Will we really help this little girl?

The answers are nebulous. With luck, some money might actually reach her. But a lot of the money do-

nated will not. In fact, in many cases only about 20% of donated money actually gets through to the people who are supposed to be helped. Where does the other 80% go?

Administrative costs of various types (including the cost of producing and distributing TV commercials) eat up a lot of donated money. Payrolls have to be met, government compliance regulations must be adhered to, travel must be paid for, and much more.

Some charities such as Oxfam manage to spend an impressive proportion of the donated money they receive on the causes they espouse. Other charities, however, may spend precious little on the stories of deprivation they describe. In reality, and sadly, they may exist more for the benefit of the people running those charities and not for the victims they purport to be helping.

When you're thinking of donating to a charity remember the classic saying: "buyer beware". In the case of charities, it's "Donor beware!"



Who says I'm not allowed in here?

Funding for our deficit

"Today, the Bank of Canada monetizes only 7.5 percent of the state deficit. The Canadian money supply increases by C\$22 billion annually, but the Bank of Canada creates less than 2 percent of the increase. If the Canadian government had continued to fund itself as it had before the mid-1970s, estimates are that Canada would now be operating with a surplus of C\$13 billion."

Ellen Hodgson Brown
The Public Bank Solution, 2013

Amazonian deterioration

At the end of October, 2014, an article in the Guardian noted that the Amazonian rainforest had deteriorated to such an extent, according to a recent scientific report, that it was losing its ability to regulate weather systems. Severe drought conditions in the southeast of Brazil may be one of the consequences.

Widespread cutting and clearing have caused the deterioration. That meant much wealth for some. But it meant increasing lack of wealth for many more people.

Environments often change slowly, sometimes imperceptibly. But they do change, and the conditions for human activity change with them, too often for the worse.

Is the situation in Amazonia a wake-up call for us? Does it carry any meaning for Canadians? Perhaps we would be wise to pay attention. After all, Canada has a massive tree cover of its own. Are we well guarded against their deterioration? Do we care enough?

Ebola warning

The Ebola outbreak of 2014 in Africa provided us with stark images of human suffering on an unbearable scale.

This terrible outbreak carried with it a serious warning. A serious disease can break out in a society at any time. Are we as prepared as we should be for this possibility?

The Ebola outbreak was all the worse because most of the societies afflicted were just not prepared for the deadly onslaught.

How many lives could have been saved had better preparation been in place?

How much better prepared are the "developed" countries for sudden disease outbreaks in their midst? Could our health care systems cope?

Some serious thinking and planning seems to be in order here.

Estimating disasters

Sober estimates show that by 2015 about 375-million people will experience climate-related disasters annually.

In 2010 about 263-million people dealt with such disasters.

Tea Party anger

"The Tea Party was born in anger in February 2009, when Chicago hedge fund trader Rick Santelli went into a nationally televised tirade against taxpayer-funded bailouts to foreclosed homeowners. In an angry rant on CNBC's Squawk Box, Santelli shouted that taxpayers had no desire to 'subsidize the losers.' His message was: Stop the government from helping other Americans."

Hedrick Smith
Who Stole the American Dream? 2012



We see blossoms!

What invisible hand?

"In practice, the invisible hand does not exist, any more than 'pure and perfect' competition does, and the market is always embodied in specific institutions such as corporate hierarchies and compensation committees."

Thomas Piketty,
Capital in the Twenty-First Century, 2014.

Managing change in projects

Projects can succeed or fail depending on how well changes are managed.

Ideally, projects have change management plans or processes written into them from the start, perhaps in the project charter.

Sudden changes while a project is underway can impact timings and costs. Managers who insist on changes in an ongoing project are imposing serious risks to the project.

Good project management always includes properly agreed processes for change management.



Are you ready to horse around?

Are we enjoying the rut?

On September 30, 2013, an article appeared in the New York Times called, "The Rut We Can't Get Out Of". In this article Daniel Alpert, the author, stated, "We are in an age of global oversupply: an oversupply of global labor (hence high underemployment); an oversupply of global productive capacity (hence ultra-low inflation); and an oversupply of global capital (hence low interest rates)."

We're now well into the year 2015, and we still seem to be in the same rut. Is this really what we face now for the foreseeable future?

Alpert called for fresh thinking about our socio-economic circumstances. Instead of continually insisting on policies that clearly aren't working for everyone, economists and politicians need to deal with the world as it now exists. This means

properly taking into account the workings of newer economies such as China's or India's and ceasing to pretend that nothing fundamental has shifted in global economic processes. It also means that we need to do something more effective about millions of unemployed and underemployed people in the developed world as well as in the developing world.

Too many people now despair about their prospects under overwhelming neoliberal policies. Too many promises made over the years remain unfulfilled. A society cannot be at peace with itself if a significant number of its citizens feel deprived and left out.

Is it really impossible for us to escape the policy rut we're in? Is this rut really so beneficial? Can we not do better?

How do we hold power responsible?

As Canadians, we know we have rights.

We think of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as a touchstone for all our rights.

But if the Charter is ignored or deliberately bypassed by those in power, who will object?

All of us who live in this country have some responsibility to ensure that our nation lives up to its commitments and responsibilities. If our leaders seem to ignore or bypass those commitments and responsibilities, we must be ready to speak out and remind them in forthright terms.

Quite often those in power may find objections based on our rights awkward or uncomfortable to deal with. But the fundamental point isn't to make them comfortable in their power. The point is to ensure, in no uncertain terms, that power has its limits, and citizens are there to provide clear reminders of those limits.

5 conditions

The Canada Health Act was set up to adhere to these five conditions:

1. Public administration.
2. Comprehensiveness.
3. Universality.
4. Accessibility, and
5. Portability.

Sometimes it's worth keeping these conditions in mind as various "reforms" for our health care system are considered.

Some provinces may already be violating the Canada Health Act by violating these conditions. Who will hold those provinces to account? Who cares enough to push for such accountability?

At home with pollution

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notes that the air inside our homes or offices can "be more seriously polluted than the outdoor air." How does your home or office stack up?