

P o l i t i c y

OPTIONS

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	Cover Art Courtesy Duke of Argyle Gallery, Halifax, N.S. Anthony Law • Lily Pads, Williams Lake, 1979 • Oil on Canvas • 36 × 40 in.	

By Deborah Coyne

Better Marching Order

Current social dynamics could be used to give impetus to essential radical changes in our power structure and the whole range of our public policy

We all have some sort of vision of the type of society we would like ourselves and our children to live in. A fundamental responsibility of those in public life is to articulate the essential values and principles that underlie this vision, and to establish long-range goals that are consistent with it. They must also prepare guidelines for formulating and carrying out appropriate shorter-term public policies to move in the direction of those goals.

The essence of leadership is to describe and communicate such a vision and long-range goals. This must not be underestimated, and it brings to mind a particularly penetrating comment by Barbara Tuchman in her excellent book, *March to Folly: Mankind, it seems, makes a poorer performance of government than of any other human activity. In this sphere, wisdom, which may be defined as the exercise of judgement acting on experience, common sense and available information, is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests?*

Keeping this warning in mind, I will discuss in this article a number of trends that seem likely to shape Canadian society as we approach the turn of the century. When I speak of "trends", I am not referring to something autonomous, predetermined by the inevitable forces of history, but rather, certain significant dynamics that are reflected in our collective psyche at this stage of our social, economic, political and moral evolution. I will focus on how these dynamics present opportunities for us to direct the course of history. With the necessary determination and leadership, we can avoid the march to folly described by Barbara Tuchman.

First, there is a pervasive cynicism, a profound disillusionment with, and mistrust of, the major institutions in

society: government, business and labour.

Second, there is the rising power and influence of a new coalition in Canadian society, based in the so-called "popular sector" comprised of churches, employee groups (including unions), women's groups, social agencies, ethno-cultural organizations and voluntary associations, whose priorities and approaches will increasingly be reflected in the public policy agenda.

Third, there is widespread frustration over our inability to assert control over our lives and our palpable failure to deal adequately with the all too evident inequalities and inequities in society today.

Fourth, there is an increasing sensitivity towards the rights of individuals and groups in society, as the full impact of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms begins to be felt.

These dynamics are, of course, all interrelated to some degree. There is not space here to discuss other forces, which are likely to interact with these, such as widespread concern about environmental pollution and increasing awareness of international interdependence. These, too, could add impetus to a drive for policy change.

The first dynamic involves the widespread disillusionment and cynicism that is most obvious in the public reaction to the scandals that have been rocking governments in Ottawa and Washington. We see it in the increased concern about conflicts of interest, about corruption and the abuses of patronage.

In the private business sector, the disillusionment began with the onset of crises in our major financial institutions: first, trust companies, then banks, and, most recently, insurance companies. The cynicism has now intensified in reaction to the insider trading scandals, to real estate scams, to the oppression of minority shareholders, and to the

merger mania in a corporate world which seems increasingly dominated by paper entrepreneurs motivated by unbridled greed. Not surprisingly, standards of public and corporate morality are under intense scrutiny in the media, in the courts, in public inquiries, in legislative committees and before regulatory tribunals.

This crisis of confidence in government and business extends equally to labour unions. Unions appear unable to adapt to the exigencies of the post-industrial society and are criticized for myopically focusing on the self-interest of their particular members: on job security, for example, at whatever cost to society. They are viewed as impeding, rather than easing, the transition to the technology-driven age. They are considered, too, to be increasingly irrelevant, since the vast majority of employees in Canada, particularly those in the increasingly dominant service sector, do not even enjoy their putative protection: union membership as a proportion of the labour force dropped from 31.4 percent in 1982 to 29.7 percent in 1985.

Our response to this crisis of confidence in our major societal institutions will be critical. We must revive a genuine commitment to public service as opposed to the pragmatic pursuit of power, whether economic or political. We must find leaders who will articulate and pursue the broader public interest and be more than mere brokers among special interests.

If we can do this, we will succeed in restoring public confidence and in strengthening the socio-economic fabric of the country. But in the process we will alter profoundly the relationship between the state and society, and the state and the individual. Labels such as capitalist or socialist, liberal or conservative, public or private sector, will consequently fade in significance.

Perhaps the most accurate way to

describe this trend in conventional terms is to speak of the emergence of a social democratic alternative, uniquely tailored to fundamental Canadian liberal values.

It is the second dynamic — the surfacing in the popular sector of “counter-institutions” (as they are labelled by Daniel Drache) which will propel us towards this social democratic alternative. These new groups already constitute a force for change in society. Examples of their increasing visibility include such coalitions as the Solidarity movement against government cutbacks in British Columbia, the defence of abortion rights, the resistance to the deindexing of old age pensions, and the Social Policy Reform Group to monitor federal government cutbacks.

Although these coalitions and their activities are still fragile and loosely coordinated, their shared rejection of the “magic of the market-place” approach to the determination of our economic and social future is increasingly striking a responsive chord.

As devastating levels of unemployment continue, as the growing scarcity of affordable housing results in more and more homeless Canadians, as regional disparities worsen, and as real business investment continues to flag, our excessive reliance on the private sector as the so-called “engine of growth” is being called into question.

Furthermore, to the extent that the private/public sector dichotomy no longer appears useful as a framework for developing public policy, we are also led to question the wisdom and relevance of the conventional assumptions about fiscal and monetary policies.

On the fiscal side, it is clear that traditional approaches to taxing and spending and the manipulation of aggregate demand can no longer be relied upon to provide meaningful incentives for investment and saving and the expansion of output and employment. The current tax reform initiatives, aimed at simplification, transparency, the elimination of business incentives and so forth, are perhaps the best evidence of the diminishing importance of traditional fiscal policies.

Concern over controlling the deficit and our national debt is also forcing us to review our conventional assumptions about government spending. For example, it is leading us to focus much more on the private sector surplus that is the counterpart to the deficit, and hence the role of the private sector in overcoming

the fiscal crisis. We are also beginning to analyze our public expenditures in a more discriminating way, and are recognizing that many of the services provided by the government are indispensable and contribute to society's productivity for years to come. These involve long-term investments in research and development, public education, health, pollution controls and community infrastructure.

On the monetary side, the high interest rate approach to controlling inflation and other economic ills that resulted in such wholly unacceptable levels of unemployment, particularly during the 1981-82 recession, has now been almost totally discredited. We also recognize that high interest rates have seriously distorted the distribution of national income in favour of the paper entrepreneurs and accelerated the trend toward increased concentration of wealth and power. At the same time, high interest rates have significantly increased the share of unproductive interest income in GNP, at the expense of those valuable entrepreneurs who *do* employ people, take risks and produce real goods and services.

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Finally, we also recognize that there are better ways to achieve adequate exchange rate stability than through the maintenance of a positive interest rate differential vis à vis the United States—a policy that has resulted in disturbing increases in the level of our foreign indebtedness, and debt service payments.

In any event, the internationalization of capital markets that permits billions of dollars to be shifted at the speed of an electronic impulse has, as Peter Drucker observes, resulted in the uncoupling of capital flows and exchange rates from the flow of real goods and services. More generally, the so-called “symbol” or financial economy consisting of

capital movements and financial transactions has become separated from the “real” economy, and has become the driving force of both the international and domestic economies. Money itself is a dominant commodity, rather than simply a symbol by which to measure the sale of real goods and services. The cost of capital and our exchange rate are now the critical elements that determine our comparative advantage and our international competitiveness.

The implications of these developments for our domestic policies are very significant, especially as we move towards the cashless society and the deregulation of financial services. We must firmly set aside the traditional assumption that the manipulation of the money supply and its prices (interest rates) can be delegated to central bankers, while the government independently takes care of the budget, taxes, output and employment.

New approaches to the determination of capital costs and exchange rate stability are critical, and must at the very least be integrated with our approaches to taxing, spending and labour market policies. Thus, the debate must once again return to such issues as the advantages of made-in-Canada interest rates, and policies to encourage capital formation within Canada, to discourage capital outflows, and to monitor more closely the benefits of foreign investment flows.

The new coalition that is emerging seems to be determined to move beyond the traditional fiscal and monetary policy framework. Its members understand the need for a new approach to economic and social development—one that involves adapting to the global technological revolution and shifting away from our reliance on natural resources and certain traditional manufacturing sectors. But they also reject the pursuit of economic growth as an end in itself, and refuse to abdicate to unaccountable private actors the power to define employment and investment opportunities. They are determined, too, that our policies for controlling the deficit and the national debt should not be dominated by the pursuit of a chimerical credit rating in the international financial markets.

The political power of this new coalition is steadily increasing as its members build durable networks among constituencies that are alienated from the current power structure. It is simply a matter of time before more and

more representatives of the coalition—educators, scientists, engineers, environmentalists—are elected to corporate boards of directors and enter into active political life. Their greatest challenge then will be to articulate clearly the broad public interest and use their newfound strength and influence to pursue a strategic agenda and implement major changes in the *status quo*.

Take, for example, the question of parental leave, and all the related issues such as child care, flexible work schedules. Arguably, parental leave is best dealt with as a human resource issue under the relevant employment-related legislation at the provincial and federal levels, rather than ineffectively under the unemployment insurance system. Yet, during the recent Forget Commission of Inquiry, women's groups simply pressed Forget to retain and improve the current provisions and ultimately, it appears, did influence the proposals in the final report. In future, though, such groups must recognize their ability, and indeed their duty, to bring about creative public policy changes.

They should, for instance, broaden their perspective by working with other interested groups and individuals, and seek, not to maintain the *status quo*, but to ensure that the relevant employment and human resource ministers at both levels of government cooperate to bring about really significant changes in our approach to such critical issues.

The response of governments to the recent liability insurance crisis will also demonstrate the potential power of the members of the new coalition. At the very least, the public debate has successfully moved beyond the narrow concerns of the insurance industry and legal profession who would obviously prefer simply to tinker with the *status quo*. The reality is, however, that the current private insurance system is unable to cope with the risks and uncertainty inherent in society today. Nor is it able to respond adequately to contemporary demands for compensation.

The challenge for the representatives of disabled Canadians, sports and recreation groups, consumer associations and community organizations, is to insist that our governments rise above the pressures of traditional lobby groups, whether business or professional, and recognize the need for major systemic change involving a no-tort comprehensive disability compensation scheme, together with more concerted and effective regulation of risky, hazard-

ous activity.

Closely related to the general disillusionment with our dominant institutions is a third dynamic — the widespread frustration over our inability to assert control over our lives and our failure to deal adequately with the inequalities and inequities in society today. We seem unable to come to grips with the serious challenges we face, notably, poverty and unemployment, inadequate education and training, and the widening income gap between more affluent and poorer Canadians. The current power structure appears remote, unaccountable, and insensitive to the concerns of ordinary Canadians.

Unemployment continues at devastating levels, and for those who are able to hold onto their jobs, technology appears to be creating two classes of workers consisting of a "technobility" with the information and skills to control the new production processes, and "technopeasants" whose lives are molded and directed by them. Indeed, we now face the very real possibility of intensified class tensions within Canadian society. A dissatisfied lower class that refuses to be content with pushing a "Big Mac" button in a fast-food restaurant, cleaning floors or operating a photocopying machine, presents a serious potential problem.

What this means is that we must make major changes in the nature and organization of the work place. Employers must cooperate with their employees and review and change job descriptions so as to combine automaton-like work with more stimulating and fulfilling responsibilities, as well as with training for other types of employment. Innovative work-sharing and flexible scheduling schemes should also be worked out.

This search for new approaches to the problem of unemployment and to adapting to technology is also forcing us to review the record of the welfare state. More specifically, the sudden appearance of food banks, and the evidence that large numbers of people are homeless should have shocked us into questioning our commitment to increased social and economic justice.

We should now be searching for new forms of social organization, new approaches to education and training, employment and social assistance that will restore a sense of control over the direction of our lives, and create a more compassionate, just and egalitarian society.

The key to meaningful progress lies in our human resources, that is, our investment in the knowledge, creativity, skill and motivation of individuals. This is the most critical input without which our technological and economic progress will founder. In particular, in a world in which so much activity depends on the processing of knowledge and information, and the development and application of new technologies, education must be considered the essential infrastructure of this country, as our natural resources have been in the past.

Above all else, we must be firm in our commitment to respect human dignity and self-worth. Respect for human dignity cannot be fulfilled simply through mechanical transfers of income to meet basic material needs. Nor is it fulfilled through the provision of basic social services by impersonal welfare bureaucracies. Demonstrating respect for human dignity includes ensuring that, to the greatest extent possible, everyone has an opportunity to engage in meaningful and fulfilling work.

This is where the need for a new approach to distributive justice and the integration of our welfare and employment policies becomes obvious. Our pursuit of social justice in this fast-paced, electronic age now requires an equitable redistribution of work opportunities and the enhancement of employability through better, more accessible education and training on an ongoing basis.

This is at least as important as the traditional focus on mechanisms for income redistribution and new approaches like a guaranteed minimum income. In other words, welfare should always be considered the second-best solution for destitute Canadians, the best solution being to guarantee all Canadians access to the necessary education and training and enable them to become happy, productive participants in the mainstream of our social and economic life.

Given the significant changes that are already taking place within the current power structure in society, what new forms of social organization can be expected to emerge and what new approaches to social and economic development should be encouraged?

We should focus on community enterprises and small and medium-sized businesses as sources of employment. We should take firm steps to encourage

employee ownership and control, perhaps along the lines of the Swedish wage earners' funds. Employee ownership and participatory management can help to create the kind of organizations in which people can pool their efforts, insights and enthusiasm without fear of exploitation.

As Robert Reich observes, less hierarchical decision-making and communications structures will go a long way toward generating a sense of collective entrepreneurship. Intensified worker commitment, however intangible, is a far more important measurement of productivity, innovation potential, and competitiveness than sterile statistics such as output per hour worked.

In addition, greater worker control could facilitate alternative forms of compensation such as profit sharing, the financing of special training and education arrangements and the implementation of an appropriate incomes policy to help control any new surges of inflationary pressures. Such inflationary pressures are likely to reemerge as the American dollar enters a crisis period, and as, hopefully, we take firm steps at last to hold interest rates and the cost of capital in Canada to reasonable levels, to encourage capital formation within Canada, and to expand public employment opportunities, especially in such areas as the repair of our decaying community infrastructure, and the construction of affordable housing.

At the same time as moving towards such new forms of social and economic democracy, we must develop new and more effective approaches to regulation in a wide range of areas—occupational health and safety, employment standards, consumer protection, workplace pollution and environmental protection—approaches that will entail direct worker/consumer involvement in the formulation and enforcement of appropriate rules and penalties. Greater use of task forces, advisory boards and legislative committees is one possibility.

We should also establish a network of locally elected development boards that will take a leading role in promoting local business and local services. For example, they might control the delivery of community and health services, and assume various functions now carried out by the Canada Employment Centres within the unemployment insurance system.

Certainly such community boards would be the most concrete manifestation of the integration of our welfare

and employment policies, and our new approaches to economic and social development. In this connection, it may be noted that since 1983 in France, state welfare offices have held direct elections to the boards of local welfare caisses with turnouts higher than those in most local elections.

This focus on community involvement and control should also be reflected in more constructive and active involvement of parents and families on local school boards. This might help to spur the much needed reorientation of our system of primary and secondary school education so that it ensures that our children have the basic skills and knowledge to enable them to cope with the information-based technology age and to continue to learn throughout their careers. This reorientation must constitute one prong in our attack on the totally unacceptable levels of illiteracy in Canadian society today, and must reduce the equally unacceptable high school drop-out rate whereby 30 to 40 percent of students never complete secondary school.

We must develop new . . . approaches to regulation

This reorientation of primary and secondary schooling should then be complemented by changes at the post secondary level to ensure access to ongoing education and training to all Canadians. Our current fixation on professional credentials such as law, business and medical degrees should gradually dissipate as our focus shifts to interdisciplinary studies, especially those involving sciences and technology. We should also emphasize flexibility in moving in and out of the workplace, apprenticeship schemes, cooperative education and training, paid educational leave, and so forth.

Any success in responding to citizens' needs and demands and in implementing a new strategic agenda will require, of course, a high degree of federal-provincial cooperation. If new priorities and strategic approaches really take shape, major organizational changes at all levels of government to accommodate new programs and initiatives will

also be put in place.

At the federal level, we would create, for example, a Department of Employment and Human Resource Development. The minister would have his or her own particular substantive responsibilities (such as for employment equity initiatives) in addition to a role in coordinating the activities of a number of second-tier ministers. These ministers could be concerned respectively with the federal contributions to education and skill development, social assistance and social services, child care, employer-employee relations, health care and pensions, and housing.

This two-tiered ministerial structure could then be part of a more general reorganization of cabinet, and accompanied by significant parliamentary reforms involving a much greater role for legislative committees. For example, there should be a Standing Committee on Human Resource Development and Employment Equity to which the Canadian Human Rights Commission would report directly.

The mandates of the second-tier ministers could clearly reflect new realities and priorities. The minister responsible for employee-employer relations could take the lead in initiatives to encourage employee ownership along the lines of the Swedish wage earners' funds, to promote innovative work- and gain-sharing schemes, to provide a guarantee of access to training and education, to implement an incomes policy and possibly a wage subsidy scheme. The minister could also be responsible for developing labour market policies such as those in respect of justification for plant closures and layoffs, and for guiding the reform of the unemployment insurance system.

The minister responsible for social assistance and social services could have the responsibility for implementing a comprehensive disability insurance scheme, an income supplementation program for the working poor, and perhaps a guaranteed minimum income, and for spearheading the initiative to integrate our tax and transfer system. He or she could also cooperate with the minister of housing in implementing an effective strategy to ensure adequate and affordable housing for all Canadians.

The minister responsible for child care could focus on priorities such as quality day care, the needs of single parent families, young offenders, and a whole range of issues affecting the well-being of young Canadians.

The minister responsible for education and skills development could have responsibility, among other things, for the federal role in cooperative education initiatives, the anti-illiteracy campaign, ongoing training programs.

Finally, the minister responsible for health care and pensions could spearhead initiatives to encourage community health care centres, to implement a homemakers' pension and flexible retirement schemes, to ensure adequate coverage for part-time workers, and to promote greater employee control of our vast pool of pension funds to complement employee ownership initiatives.

The fourth dynamic that is having a major influence on our society will be the increasing sensitivity towards the rights of individuals and groups as the full impact of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms begins to be felt. Despite the fact that the Charter is now almost half a decade old, we have not even begun to realize how profoundly it has altered the relationship between the individual and the state, and the political and socio-economic fabric of the country. The Charter articulates the key fundamental values which are common to all of us and which define ourselves and our concept of the Canadian federation.

These are reflected in provisions for mobility, language and minority education rights, broad guarantees of equality, and our commitment to multiculturalism. In addition, the Constitution now entrenches the principle of equalization and the affirmative commitment of all governments to promote equal opportunities for the well-being of all Canadians.

It cannot be doubted that the Charter is having a transforming effect on the general conduct of politics and our language of political discourse. We are increasingly conscious of individual and group rights, and our collective identity now incorporates more fully our linguistic dualism and multicultural heritage. The focus on rights and the fundamental values expressed in the Charter is clearly shaping the public policy agenda, not only as a result of legal challenges to legislative and administrative action, but also through the increased sensitivity of policy-makers, who are determined to "Charter-proof" any proposed legislation or other government action in order to preempt such legal action.

The influence of the Charter on public policy is perhaps most obvious with respect to our approaches to

dealing with the inequality and inequities in society, notably, employment and social assistance policies. For example, we are increasingly conscious of the needs of disadvantaged groups such as women, visible minorities, natives, the disabled, and are taking steps through employment equity/affirmative action and pay equity initiatives to improve their well-being. We also more frequently speak of a person's right to a decent minimum standard of living, a decent quality of life, as something that is as worthy of protection as traditional property rights and contractual rights.

Over 25 years ago, writing on the eve of the Kennedy era in his landmark book *The Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith confidently predicted that the increasingly wealthy post-war society would endorse the proposition that poverty was not an acceptable feature of social life, and seek actively to reduce social inequality.

According to Galbraith, *it was the unarticulated assumption of American liberals... that the newly affluent—blue collar workers with middle class incomes, the new, vastly enhanced professional class, the modern, relatively well-paid white collar bureaucracy—those protected from the trials of unemployment, old age and illness, would in gratitude have political attitudes differ-*

ent from those of the older rich. And so, presumably, would their yet more fortunate off-spring.

But, as Galbraith acerbically points out twenty-five years later in the foreword to the 1984 edition of *The Affluent Society: The liberals were wrong. Now the securely affluent have become a voting majority or, more accurately, a majority of those who vote. Their political tendency is that of the affluent of the past. It reflects the age-old tendency of ignoring or rationalizing the differing fortunes of the rich and the poor.*

Clearly, this analysis of the newly affluent generation of the 1970s and 1980s presents a harsh indictment of our political and moral-ethical values. But, as I hope I have demonstrated, the trends or dynamics now manifesting themselves in contemporary society point to opportunities for a much brighter future. □

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LETTER

Narrow Business

Sir:

In her review (*Options*, January 1987) of *Megafirms: Strategies for Canada's Multinationals* Deborah Coyne criticizes Alan Rugman and me for not being sympathetic to industrial policy, which she proceeds to write about at some length.

Deborah Coyne finds *Megafirms* to be "totally devoid of any public policy content". I wonder if she has heard of the familiar business maxim: "if it ain't broke, don't fix it".

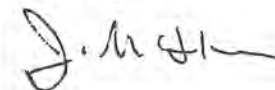
We analyzed Canada's set of large multinationals using modern management theory. While Professor Coyne dreams of new firms which will "harness the technological revolution to the benefit

of all Canadians" she misses our central point that Canada already has a set of very successful resource-based firms leading Canada into the twenty first century. They do this by creating a value-added chain of extraction, processing and marketing.

Why would "government" (whatever this is in today's fractionalized political system) wish to intervene and disrupt the satisfactory performance of our efficient multinationals in the pursuit of Professor Coyne's ephemeral industrial policy?

This is not to say that business executives should be running the government; neither does government need to be involved in business. "Hands Off" is fairly specific "public policy prescription". It is the theme of our book.

Yours etc.,



John McIlveen