

Canada: Nature Versus The Global Neoliberal Construct

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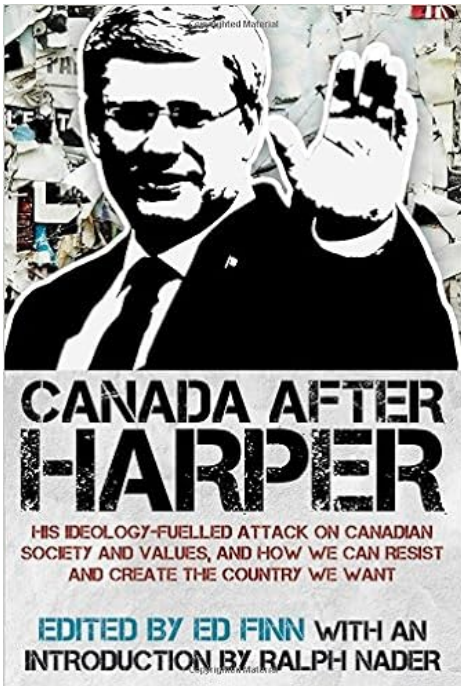
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Thirty years after World War II, Canada reached a consensus including all political parties. It was agreed that the view that individuals and the economy should be left to themselves was no longer desirable. Canadians were to have a market economy but they will not have a market-determined society for two reasons, (1) to favor equity among citizens and (2) for stability. It was recognized that the democratic state needs to play a continuous intervening role in the economy to keep it healthy and prevent another deep depression; without a healthy economy and a focus on fairness "the social rights listed in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights would remain a utopian dream" (Ed Broadbent's Montreal address a few years ago).

We have the right to be concerned about whether our country responds to our needs or not. I arrived in Canada in 1977 and experienced the benefits of the welfare state; I was surprised to have access to medical care for a reasonable premium. My children, born at Misericordia Hospital (in Edmonton), received excellent care; as their mother I did too. We visited our public library regularly loaning books that I read to them and later they learned to read for themselves developing a love for books that lasts until today. My children attended elementary and high school but did not have to worry about how much money their parents made. They learned to swim as part of a school program. They were the first generation of Canadian boys and girls playing soccer every spring and fall; it cannot surprise us that today so many Canadians love the game.

The existence of the welfare state facilitated it all lowering stress levels in many young families with limited income like ours and helping them to feel worthy. It played a role in my decision to pursue higher education to attain employment in my field of choice, which benefited my family as I became a better educated and happier mother and partner. Not everybody benefited like I did, I know; but, I learned from this that extending, rather than curtailing, benefits would be the answer to ensure increased inclusion. Over the years, however, as neoliberal ideology became dominant I witnessed relentless attacks on our social welfare system and policies to purposefully erode it. After 40 years of living in Canada, I want to speak about my feelings to encourage reflection. To argue for fairness in a climate of austerity is challenging; and yet, it is the thing to do to end poverty and promote human rights -both essential in challenging corporate craziness and greed, and in finding solutions to real problems in our relationship with the natural world. The erosion of our benefits and rights moved us away from a fair society; it also increased prejudices, unhealthy competition with each other, reckless consumption, loss of purpose and meaning, and unhappiness with the lives we live.



The focus of “Canada After Harper,” a collection of essays published in 2015, is on topics emerging as the neoliberal agenda increased its grip on Canada; its goal seems to be the promotion of more informed discussions, increasing personal reflection and societal engagement towards collective action. The book has twenty chapters. The first four chapters discuss the environment, the following five the economy, the next six social issues and the last five governance and politics.

Environmental concerns are not only the most urgent but the most serious. David Suzuki argues that psychological barriers block the implementation today of solutions that are feasible. Maude Barlow challenges our views regarding the abundance of drinkable water. Joyce Nelson helps us make the connection between Harper’s religious fundamentalism and his disregard for the environment and to this end she quotes Andrew Nikiforuk who says:

“Given this government’s pointed attacks on environmentalists and science of any kind, Harper would seem to take his advice from the Cornwall Alliance, a coalition of right-wing scholars, economists and Evangelicals. The Alliance questions mainstream science, doubts climate change, views environmentalists as ‘native evil,’ champions fossil fuels, and supports libertarian economics.”

The five chapters dedicated to the economy begin with Andrew Jackson asking whose interests are being served; the answer is obvious: the interests of the polluting industries of gas and oil have been setting government environmental agenda. Scott Sinclair and Stuart Trew discuss the role of free trade agreements in imposing a neoliberal paradigm that weakens the state. Lynne Fernandez discusses how the attacks on unions debilitated democracy and prosperity. Linda McQuaig warns us on becoming a plutocracy. Trish Hennessy discusses the role tax cuts have had in debilitating the power and the role of the welfare state; Alex Himelfarb discusses this too, in governance and politics, bringing attention to how government precipitated Canada into the “austerity trap” which undermined democracy, moved forward the neoliberal project and seriously transformed the country.

The six chapters dedicated to social issues, include discussions on rights and equality; from Colleen Fuller on our right to health care to Larry Kuehn on our right to public education (undermined by a global corporate model focused on competition and expensive “testing” that increases corporate profits). Kate McInturff discusses lack of gender equality; Ed Finn focuses on growing child poverty while Nora Loreto discusses youth’s increasing challenges of inclusion. Arthur Manuel focuses on indigenous rights and anti-colonial struggle highlighting aboriginal traditional role in environmental protection of land and water.

What is at stake is the quest for a fair and just society. Professor Himelfarb challenges the view that we no longer care about achieving one. We want the things we always wanted: protecting the environment, building sustainable communities, a just and fair society, greater equality, helping people in need, opportunities for the young, strong social programs; but, we are no longer sure, he says, they are possible anymore; still, to achieve this vision collective action is a must.

“What worries me the most –what is arguably the great paradox of our times– is that while our collective challenges seem more daunting than ever, our collective toolkit has never been weaker. We have seen a profound erosion in trust –in one another and in our institutions– a trust that is a prerequisite for collective action.”

It is time to examine the emergence of our current challenges, the role ideology has played in deciding priorities and to identify what is real and cannot be compromised.

Globalization, the Neo-liberal Agenda, and Canadian Sovereignty

A truly mean-spirited Canada emerged during the Harper years: a country where logging, mining and polluting waterways became acceptable, inequitable distribution of income grew to the benefit of an increasingly privileged few, violence affects one in four women and girls, indigenous peoples are the poorest, least employed and most incarcerated citizens. In Canada a million citizens came to depend on food banks for sustenance, and poverty afflicts one in seven Canadians (more than a million of them children under the age of 18). A Canadian project focused on equality, fairness and justice should be a good answer in ensuring the safety and well being of all Canadians.

Although Harper managed Canada in ways we have not seen since Richard B. Bennett (a 1930 tough-talking millionaire, creator of the exploitative “workers relief camps” and fanatic believer in free enterprise and laissez faire government) we forget that the neoliberal project emerged in Canada with Brian Mulroney. He was the Prime Minister who did more than all his predecessors combined to erode Canadian sovereignty. Still some, like Don Mazankowski, like to portray what could well be a mayor act of treason as Mulroney’s best achievement: “dragging Canada kicking and screaming into the 21st Century” –the century of corporate rule and greed.

Mulroney himself was well aware of the meaning of the ideology he promoted. During an interview with William Watson in 2000, he said it clearly:

“[I]f you believe in free trade, then you have to believe in open investment, you have to believe in deregulation and privatization. And so these are the

changes that we made because it all went together. It was a package of attitudes: free trade, getting rid of FIRA (the Foreign Investment Review Agency), getting rid of the National Energy Program, privatizing Air Canada, privatizing Petro-Canada, and so on, deregulation and all those things...And so what began as a free trade agreement has wound up shaping attitudes, not only of my government and my party and people on the right, but it has forced the Liberals into a completely new set of policies which they adopted from us."



Once Prime Minister of Canada, Mulroney moved quickly to implement free trade, well aware that it was a well-thought strategy to change citizen attitudes and government policies towards the extreme right and deregulation, privatization and corporate control of government and its agenda. Governments will no longer respond to citizens' needs or wants but to the needs and wants of multinational corporations and their elite. Government lowers taxes for the wealthy and corporations while it cuts funding to social programs for the rest of us. These agreements also favor the growth of security states -increasing surveillance of its citizens, harsher police actions, increased funding for the military and the demonization of dissent. Recently, President Trump threatened to re-open the terms of NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement) to further favor American interests; Prime Minister Trudeau welcomed Brian Mulroney, a friend of Trump, as consultant to his office and the Canadian government. The hope is that re-negotiations do not cause Canada additional damage. The irony is that Trudeau's government could trust Canadian sovereignty to Mulroney who played such a pivotal role in undermining it.

Sinclair & Trew confirm and expand on Mulroney's confession about the nature of free trade agreements:

"They are, more accurately, constitution-style documents that substantially weaken democratic institutions in the interest of freeing (from government intervention) the trade -and investment-related activities of multinational corporations. Government interventions of all types (e.g., public health and environmental regulations, the introduction and management of public services, state supports for strategic industries) are severely constrained by international trade and investment agreements -a strategy the Liberals fully bought into after the 1993 election." CUSFTA grew into NAFTA but US protectionism persisted, never allowing the promised undisturbed access to the US market that Canadians were promised. "It is a lesson that Canada refuses to learn. Like the Liberals before them, the Conservatives continue to make significant concessions to US policy-makers on trade as well as sensitive security, immigration and privacy issues."

Neoliberal Ideology and Deception

Murray Dobbin shares how Ursula Franklin was the first to see neoliberal ideology for what it

was:

“We are being occupied by the marketers just as the French and Norwegians were occupied by the Germans. We have, as they did, puppet governments who run the country for the benefit of the occupiers. We have, as they did, collaborators. We, like the French and Norwegians of the time, have to protect our families and on many occasions have to work with the occupiers...We are, as they were, threatened by deliberate willfulness, by people who have only contempt for those they occupy and who see their mission to turn over our territory to their masters.”

The occupation forces of multinational corporations disembarked in countries throughout the world including the US. Michael Hudson, an American economist, sees neoliberal economics as “junk” -an excuse for profits and financial take over. They are nothing more than an apology for a rentier class, and the large banks that financialized the economy shifting “consumer spending power” from the purchase of goods and services (driving the real economy) to the payment of interests and fees to banks and the rich. Governments no longer tax incomes on unproductive ventures as they did before; they tax labor and production. Economies have to function with a very heavy overhead to ensure that a parasitic class becomes richer and richer. It is difficult for the “real economy” to compete. Professor Hudson writes n books on the process. Junk economics are a device for ripping off workers and producers alike to benefit a non-productive parasitic class, he says, a predatory device to justify the exorbitant income of the top 1% while blaming the rising debt on the common people, forced as they are into debt-servitude just to make ends meet.

Andrew Jackson says that we face increasing levels of speculation in Canada because

“much of the growth we have experienced over the past decade, especially since the recovery from 2009, has been driven by rising mortgage debt and rising house prices fueled by ultra-low interest rates. Relative to incomes, Canadian house prices are now at more or less the same level as they were in the United States before the collapse of the market there in 2007. Canadian household debt is now at a record high of more than 160% of household disposable income. The IMF, the OECD, and other reputable agencies warn that inflated house prices and high household debt make the recent recovery highly vulnerable to another downturn...the structural reasons for slow grows” he adds “include the problem of reviving household demand when household debt is very high in many countries, including Canada.”

For average people (the non-rich) changing attitudes and policies is responsible for an increasing skewed distribution of resources and extreme inequality were the richest 0.01% of Canadians (85% of them funneling income through private corporations) can see their income almost double from 4.69 to 8 million a year. Canada’s wealthy elite is led by 70 billionaires (the Thomsons, Westons, Irvings, Rogers, Saputos, at the top and close to the 30 billion mark, the Aquilinis and Bombardiers surpassing the bottom range of 1 billion) who are far richer than we are led to believe and farther ahead of us.

What is a stake, says Linda McQuaig, is the social costs of the disenfranchisement of the many for the increasing privileges of the few:

“In a market economy, to have lots of money is to have extraordinary

advantages, primarily freedom and control over a wide range of choices in life. Those with lower incomes have less freedom and fewer choices. Large numbers of citizens, including those who are not technically “poor,” are effectively denied entry into many of the crucial activities in our society because they lack the basic ticket of admission: money”.

Overturning the economic agenda of the wealthy will not be easy; a way of doing it is returning to the central role of taxes in ensuring democracy and allowing us to make decisions collectively regarding what kind of society we want. We need to make sure that working people get an appropriate share of the wealth they help create so “*our society is a democracy, not a plutocracy.*”

Nature the Equalizer: Human Constructs versus the Natural World

In a world where human constructs are increasingly guided by destructive ideologies, Nature can become the equalizer. We face a many challenges (increased inequality, poverty and disenfranchisement) and social issues connected to the privatization of public areas; however, the destruction of our natural world cannot compare to any of the challenges our “human constructs” created.

David Suzuki highlights the consequences of the Anthropocene Epoch for the environment: the carbon dioxide we produce is so high it cannot be absorbed by photosynthesis and it has lowered the pH of our oceans as it dissolves in them; human debris litters our planet forming islands of plastic in our oceans; our agricultural runoff is creating dead zones in the oceans and our fish stocks are disappearing; toxic chemicals from industrial and agricultural activity are everywhere –in our air, water, soil, and in our bodies and the bodies of other species. Our machines drill holes and remove mountain tops ravaging entire ecosystems. We have become a force of Nature: we need to change. Human activity has killed huge populations of birds, mammals and insects and it threatens our species too.

“We are an infant species in evolutionary terms (around for 150,000 years) but we are undermining the very things that keep us alive and healthy.”

Our story as a species is remarkable:

“We lacked numbers, size, speed, strength... sensory acuity of vision, smell or hearing many other species have...our competitive advantage: a two-kilogram organ buried deep within our skulls. The human brain conferred curiosity, a remarkable memory capacity, and impressive creativity.” Our brain drives us to make sense and understand what happens around us, to seek cause. We construct worldviews in which everything is interconnected and interdependent; we learn “by observation, experience, and trial-and-error, and pass that knowledge on as priceless insights for survival.” Foresight enabled early humans to avoid dangers and exploit opportunities; ironically, today “with all the amplified predictive ability of scientists and supercomputers, we reject or ignore their warnings that we are heading along a dangerous path and so turn our backs on our great survival attribute: foresight.”

We make constructs (capitalism, the economy, markets, property rights, neo-liberalism) and believe in them, treat them as sacred: they are not. These *creations of our mind* often need to change or be dismissed, so should not be set in stone. Worse: we fail to take the laws of

Nature seriously but Nature's laws are set in stone, cannot be changed. The natural world is powerful: it sets our real constraints. We forget that our planet is the only one in our system with a biosphere, or that without a biosphere we could not survive. It took Nature millions of years to create our biosphere, a miracle; it is taking us only a few hundred years to destroy it. We face challenges of our creation but the biggest challenge is ignoring and discounting the natural world while elevating human constructs above everything. This needs to stop. Why is it so difficult for us to see something so obvious?

Suzuki argues that we have the technological capacity to deal with environmental challenges; our economy should not be a barrier. However, the mindset through which we see the world shapes the way we treat Nature: our challenge is psychological. The natural world seems to awake in us negative feelings, awareness of our limits; we are small, fragile, creatures that, despite being resourceful, could never survive without Nature as we need air, water, land, and sun to live. We are endangering our survival. As a species we display a strong need to control and controlling can become an obsession; we take things to extremes -abuse, kill or die. In literature we have likened nature with "the other" and often with a need to conquer it. We have also feminized nature: our mistreated mother. We fear nature, love it and hate it, treat it badly. Lately, we live mostly in artificial worlds of our own making (cities); separated from the natural world we relegated it to "reserves." Nature has become the enclosed environment, a resource, managed, controlled, and sold for profit. Trees, no longer seen as living organisms on which we depend for air and energy, become lumber. Water, no longer seen as the life-giving element without which we would die within days, is bottled and sold in the market to enrich corporations.

Proximity to the things and people we love feeds connection, ease anxiety; while distance breaks links and severs connections. City life is not panacea but it is predictable and makes us feel in control: we turn the faucet and there is water, we open the fridge and there is food. While living in cities: we should not forget that we depend strongly in the natural world, that our dependence is real and can only be ignored at our peril. History is full of examples of huge cities that collapsed because of environmental degradation and destruction. Still, we can be too arrogant to listen or too detached to care but, few among us can ignore that of the challenges we face in the corporate world of the 21st century our fate may be sealed by the destruction we are causing to our natural world. We have been a resourceful, but very ruthless species who have killed, starved and enslaved our own and others. We may, or may not, be moved by the suffering of our own; but, mistreating nature has consequences, it can be our undoing.

Canada is not outside this reality; our politics are not much different from the politics of the rest. We destroy nature at more or less the same pace others do. In considering the challenges neo-liberalism poses to us, or in identifying particular political leaders for their role in promoting it, we should not forget that the neo-liberal project is global. Indigenous people have understood the sacredness of the natural world, been concerned about environmental destruction well before us and struggled to protect the land and water aware that the planet cannot survive the immense destruction we are causing. True to their mandate they continue to stand against our ravages everywhere. Hope is fundamental to this struggle: let's hope that foresight, the main quality that has ensured our ascendance as a species, protects us from destroying our world, our life support system, our home.

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