

Which Future for Alberta?

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The Great Overarching Question (GOQ) facing Albertans in 2005 is this, “*Will Alberta still be a great place to live in 2105?*” Again and again in our work regarding societal change, this question has emerged at the root of the concerns Albertans have for their future. I am heartened by the fact that more and more Albertans, especially young people and their grandparents, are asking the GOQ with degrees of openness, anxiety and doubt that would have been unthinkable only a generation ago. The pity is that our official leaders are not yet able to inquire with the same openness and uncertainty. At least in public, most of our business and political leaders only speak the GOQ rhetorically. They don’t yet believe that it is worth their serious attention. You won’t have to listen long to those who seek to replace Ralph Klein to figure this out.

So publicly, the GOQ haunts us not. Officially, we lose no sleep over it. Rather, we carry on as if we had not a care; as if a grand future is ours by right. As a cabinet minister said to me, “Ruben, how can we not be positive about Alberta’s future? We can’t miss.” We are confident, even cocky, about our future.

Should we be? Is our casual attitude to the future warranted? Should we be awakening ourselves from our dogmatic slumbers and turning an eye to our future that tempers hope with caution, even pessimism?

I shall argue that we must take the GOQ seriously and explore it as if our future hangs on how we come to understand and treat it – for it does.

It is salutary to remind ourselves that in 1945, just after WWII, Saskatchewan was Canada’s third largest province – as measured by population, GDP and influence in Canada. Then virtually all commentators agreed that it, not Alberta, was the best place to invest in Western Canada. It was then as cocky and as confident as we are today. They, too, knew that their future would be golden. Sixty years later, all this has changed. Now there are more people from Saskatchewan in Alberta who are *net tax payers* – those who pay more to the government in taxes than they receive back from it – than there are *net tax payers* left in Saskatchewan. If the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce is to be believed, by age ten, children in Saskatchewan know that they must leave in order to have a good life. For the people of Saskatchewan the default answer to the GOQ as changed from “of course”, to “of course not.”

Could this happen to us?

Of course it could. History is littered with the dead shells of societies that did not prepare themselves for a changing future. I realize that it is quite normal for those within Industrial cultures to think that they are immune from profound changes in their historical context. In this sense, it is not our fault. However, it is also quite wrongheaded. The report from the International Futures Forum – *The Enlightened Corporation* – reflects the growing suspicion that something profound is afoot:

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Today's business executives have lived, matured, and succeeded in a world in which the business corporation has been essentially unchallenged — except by other business corporations. Competitiveness has been the theme. What might happen if, in the coming decade, it's less about competitiveness and more about adaptiveness — the ability to adapt to quite fundamental shifts in the social environment in which the corporations are working? What challenges does that present?

However, our record is not comforting because it shows no such sensitivity. As Albertans we missed all of the signals that the now-mythic NEP was never about energy and always about protecting the founding myth that, in Canada, the French/English compact must always trump all else, including upstart late-comer provinces. Twelve years ago, we decided, without undertaking any kind of inquiry, that BSE in Britain and Japan was no threat to us. We still “know” that we have enough water in Southern Alberta to not deflect us from our present course. Worse, we are flying blind. No significant institution in any sector of our province has a developed capacity to practice strategic foresight in an integrated manner at a high professional level. In short, in 2005, we demonstrate the same arrogance and self-inflicted blindness that led to Saskatchewan's decline.

Think with me about some of the questions we need to ask, but are not asking:

- *Will the 21st Century be essentially like the 20th or profoundly different – at least as different as the 20th Century was from the 19th?*

We need to come to terms with the fact that our present aspirations, plans, efforts and forms of governance and organization all assume that we face an essentially familiar future. Without realizing it, we are betting our grand-children's future on the fact that the classic Industrial view of reality, the earth and human persons will be good for another hundred years. In spite of all the talk of change, innovation and transformation that is now required from public platforms, if you scratch under the paint you will find that virtually every leader of every institution is committed to a future that is essentially like the world they now know and take for granted.

- *On what underlying assumptions about the earth, history and the human does our late modern Industrial society and economy rest? Will they still be valid throughout the 21st Century? If not, what forces are driving us to new perceptions of reality, our relationship to it and the implications for governance, wealth creation, learning and the creation of healthy persons, families and communities? What new understandings are challenging today's orthodoxy?*

To the extent we are ignorant of the well-springs of our own society and economy and out of touch with the forces that are eroding their legitimacy, we are as lambs before wolves. Yet few today can speak knowingly to these questions. Our CEOs, mayors, college and university presidents, bishops and deputy ministers should be thankful that they do not have to write an insightful and grounded 10 page essay on these questions in order to keep their jobs.

- *What unseen opportunities are hidden in today's societal noise and signals of change?*

The franchise that could be ours is this – to become the world's first jurisdiction that openly embraces the challenge of consciously evolving into a post-Industrial society and economy; one that truly fits the novel emerging conditions of the 21st Century. It is ironic that this commitment would also be our best long-range economic development strategy. It would create a positive global reputation and knowledge work for Albertans for several generations.

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- *What vision could be ours in our second century?*

Alberta – we are acknowledged as the world's leading pioneers of 21st Century economies, societies and ways of living.

We are admired around the world for our courageous and explicit commitment to (a) exploring and understanding the profoundly changing conditions of the 21st Century; (b) making it easy for us to access the knowledge, persons, resources and tools that we require to adapt to change; and (c) developing the new ways of living that truly fit with and capitalize on the changing conditions – ways that allow us to sustain success regardless of the conditions we face; ways that ultimately lead to the creation of a civilization that works for all.

We are the partners of choice for companies and organizations that share our commitment to creating a world that is truly wise, courageous, secure, prosperous, innovative, inclusive, integrated, sustainable and humane.

We are, in short, the most future-savvy and influential small jurisdiction in the world. The best of the world's best willingly invest and come to live here in order to participate in the work of pioneering a great 21st Century culture – a culture so exciting that our children and grandchildren have reasons to stay!

- *Which future is in our heads, hearts and hands?*

The choice is ours. We are making it daily. The tragedy is that we are not yet making it consciously or wisely. Our hope lies in these facts: (1) Deep down we know that we know better than to live as we are. (2) The most powerful force in human history is evolving human consciousness. History changes when we change our minds. The time to do so is now. Let's talk about it.