

# Whither Democracy?

## Reflections on the Prospects of Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ruben Nelson

*“To be rid of our illusions, if it does not break our courage, is a liberating experience.”*  
John Macmurray, *Conditions of Freedom*. 1949

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### Abstract

From many perspectives, democracy is doing well. When an increasing number of countries elect their governments by universal suffrage and so many pundits exude confidence, what could possibly go wrong? This question is worth exploring, especially in light of Foresight Canada’s Rule No. 1<sup>1</sup>, “*Context is King!*”

Section I asks, “*Will democracies as we now know them be able to adapt to the fundamental changes which the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will bring?*” Our reluctant conclusion is that they will not.

Section II offers the hope that a fresh understanding of democracy as a developmental human project can create a new path forward. We are hopeful pessimists – hopeful about the ultimate success of the project laid out here, and pessimistic about the ease of the journey.

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I  
**The Growing Crisis – An Inability to Cope**

The situation of humanity in the face of global transformations can be summarized in two sentences: “Societies are unprepared. Governance is ill-equipped.” In the main, contemporary governance is obsolete and unable to deal fittingly with rapidly mutating problems and opportunities.

Yehezkel Dror,  
*The Capacity to Govern,*  
A Report to the Club of Rome, 1994

It is not obvious that Yehezkel Dror is right. If he were, surely at least one government somewhere in the world would be acting accordingly. It would be making serious investments that (i) prepare its people to see their historical situation afresh and come to understand that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be fundamentally different from the 20<sup>th</sup>; (ii) begin to make the profound adaptations the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will require; and (iii) prepare those who govern to do so in startlingly different ways. The fact that no government is now doing so suggests that Dror is wrong. As we shall see, the fact that so many governments actually think they are now preparing for a changing future suggest that Dror is right. If right, he is tragically right.

We now know that cultures die when they cannot sense, think through and cope with fundamentally new developments in their situation in history. Is it possible that *democracies cannot cope with the emerging conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?* This is *the* core question.

### **Democracy as Commonly Understood**

The common understanding of ‘democracy’ – *a form of government in which citizens have the right to choose those who then have the right and obligation to govern.* Note that two ambiguities hide here. First, the class of persons recognized as *citizens* may change over time. Second, citizens may choose to be self-governing or to be governed by their chosen representatives.

In spite of the romantic appeal of the self-governing democracies of ancient Athens and the New England colonies, we will set the second ambiguity aside. Few of today’s democracies are small and concentrated enough to allow for effective face-to-face governance of the whole community. For the moment, some form of representative democracy is the norm.

Regarding the first, it is clear that over time the class of those who have been included as *citizens* has changed greatly. In 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Athens, women and slaves were excluded; adult males included. In 1215, at Runnymede, it did not occur to the King or his Nobles that the franchise the latter were forcibly expanding might ever extend to their peasants, let alone their women.

But we can now see that even in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the democratic cat was struggling out of the feudal bag. Then, the individuating pressures that came to define Industrial consciousness and

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culture were already expressed in Gothic architecture and in the invention of perspective. By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> Century, the printing press demanded literacy. Since reading is an individuating act, the emergence of persons as individuals with inherent dignity and rights was not far behind. This emerging sensibility was both contributor to and further developed by the Reformation and still-life art in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. In the 17<sup>th</sup>, it was expanded by the rise of science, Shakespeare's plays, Thomas Hobbes' political philosophy and the invention of nation states. By the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, it was generally agreed that *universal suffrage* was the norm. That this phrase meant white men while excluding blacks, women and aboriginals was not lost on the excluded. So the struggle for the franchise continued.

By 1906, Finland included women – among the first to do so. This milestone of human development is rightly celebrated. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was generally agreed that only universal suffrage can be deemed to be truly democratic; that all adults have the right to participate in determining who shall rule them.

This last phrase is deliberately blunt. It is meant to stop us and encourage reflection.

The fact is, democracy has come to be defined as *a means of choosing who will govern*. Much less has been said about how those who govern shall behave. In many ways the shift from a God-given sovereign to the sovereignty of the people has left us pretty much where our ancestors were – governments still govern; they still perceive, understand, decide and act for us, while citizens still support and obey. We still have little real and effective influence over what they do for or to us. As of old, the behaviour of governments is still largely dependant on the whims and character of those who govern and those who act in their name.

Now it is true that Bills of Rights, Freedom of Information Acts, Ombudsmen and miles of administrative laws have tilted the field of play somewhat towards citizens. But only optimists, very rich persons and large corporations see the field as at all level. Once in office, there is virtually no way for ordinary citizens to hold a democratic government accountable, short of defeat in the next election. Imagine a marriage in which the only check a wife has on her husband's behaviour is divorce. If her only weapon is the atom bomb of divorce, she is helpless against all incursions into her life, save the most dire. She has no way to stop the little hurts, the ridicule and even abuse. Today, in a liberal democratic society, no self-respecting person would stand for such an arrangement. In this light, it seems strange that we still accept such a relationship with our governments; that we do not expect from them the same recognition, respect and humanity we assume from friends and lovers.

But the fact is we do not have such expectations of our governments. Rather, we concentrate on enabling all adults to determine who will govern in relatively free and fair elections, and then learn to live with the results.

The primary result is that in today's democracies, governments seldom do what a substantial majority of citizens clearly *do not want*.

What, then, do most citizens *not want*? The overwhelming majority of citizens everywhere do not want their world to be torn asunder or their lives made more harsh and meagre. This

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visceral, but largely inchoate, desire does not show up on the list of the top-of-mind issues sought by pollsters. But it is very real, nonetheless. It sets an un-crossable line. Beyond this, what all citizens *want* is a better life for themselves and those they love, *as they now imagine it*. This last phrase is crucial.

It is clear to us from over forty years of practice, that when asked about the future, ordinary citizens project a world that is essentially the best that they now know, with the problems airbrushed out and the resulting holes filled with money. It is not merely implausible to the vast majority, it is inconceivable to them, that the future they face could be fundamentally different from the world they now know. Citizens do not escape their inherited cultural frame of reference, mostly because they do not know they have one, let alone what it is.

Put formally as a syllogism, the point is that democracies valorize consensus, while consensus views systematically fail to notice system breaks. It follows that democracies fail to notice system breaks.

In 2006, the inability to stand outside one's culture and view it as one of the many forms human culture has taken over the last 100,000 years is shared by virtually everyone on the planet, including leaders of government and opinion. As a result, democratic politics shares this much with all pre-democratic politics – it is played out within inherited and unconsciously held cultural frames; the core arguments are never about these frames of reference and how they might change and even now may be changing. In short, governments and their citizens are hemmed in by an unseen, but nevertheless effective, fence that marks the space for possible action. Thoughts of profound cultural evolution and transformation are simply a non-starter.

To make matters worse, even though they share a deep cultural frame, as politicians know, real agreement among citizens as to just what 'a better life' includes and excludes is rare. Seldom does a whole population come to a genuine consensus on what they want. As a result, democratic governments and opposition parties invest huge amounts of energy in trying to figure out what combination of goodies will attract a plurality, if not a majority. The not-quite-focussed nature of democratic elections, with their accent on essential continuity, simple solutions and immediate gratification, is not an accident. It flows from the inability to escape an invisible assumption of Industrial consciousness and culture – life is a function of the production and consumption of goods and services. And this view, in turn, is now greatly influenced by today's media.

This is not the place to explore the effects of modern advertising and global media on our lives. It is enough to note that virtually all advertising reinforces either a pre-adolescent conformity or an adolescent sensibility. The messages are either "*Buy it now; everyone else does*" or "*Indulge and reward yourself now, you are worth it.*" Note the 'now.' In both cases the future is discounted. Today's media provides little or no support for the emergence of a self-critically self-aware, systems-thinking, gratification-deferring, post-egoist identity. Rather, Industrial societies and their markets need citizens who exhibit either conforming or emotionally adolescent selves.

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It is not the least surprising, therefore, that throughout the late-modern Industrial world, retail politics has become a form of marketing. We are no longer citizen-owners of a democratic community, with a responsibility to sustain and even enhance it. Rather, in the name of our democratic rights as citizens whose voice must be heard, we demand our own gratification now. So while pre-modern societies struggle to preserve some form of cultural cohesion, late modern Industrial societies fracture into smaller and smaller groups, each of which becomes a demographic to either pursue or neglect as our leaders plot their strategy to obtain power in the next election. The dream of *all of the people* is fading. Decisions are made by loose coalitions, within the unseen parameters of Industrial consciousness and culture.

The net result is that there is no population of citizens anywhere in the world that is willing to elect a government that runs on any other platform than some version of this one, *“Elect us and we will make the world you already know work even better for you.”* About this, both the Left and the Right are in agreement. What divides them is not the underlying and unconsciously-held societal project, but what is now to be included as ‘better’ and who is to be included in ‘you’.

The hard reality is that the capacity of today’s democratic governments to sense, think through and cope with profound and traumatizing conditions that require a cultural transformation is virtually nil. There simply is no market for such heroic history-altering action in either identity-based conformity or the adolescent retail politics of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As one Alberta politician puts it, *“Politicians don’t lead parades, they join them.”*

When the times require behaviours from us as citizens that are seen to be both difficult and unattractive by most, then the prospects for democracy are not bright. In saying this, we are not casting aspersions on ordinary citizens or suggesting that 2<sup>nd</sup> order, reflexive, self-critical consciousness and thought is easily achieved. It is not. But both the novelty and difficulty of such awareness strengthen our argument.

Put formally, the central thesis of this paper is this:

**As long as democracy entails a universal franchise and most adults continue to live within and by unseen and unconsciously held late modern Industrial assumptions, there is little prospect that democratically elected governments will be able to cope with emerging conditions that would require us to deviate substantially from the ways of seeing, thinking and living with which we are deeply familiar. If the 21<sup>st</sup> Century demands such novelty, democracies are in deep trouble.**

So the most important question becomes, *“Is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century truly a time of profound, history-altering cultural change, evolution and transformation?”*

### **The Emerging Character and Requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In our view, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is and will be such a time. Any version of business as usual will no longer do.

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What follows draws upon a Foresight Canada 2005 foresight research report.<sup>2</sup> It set out two essential messages. One is good news, the other is not.

First the bad news: The global changes now washing over us and all persons are far more profound than is commonly understood. Ours is one of the few periods of history during which a truly history-altering cultural mutation and deviation is<sup>3</sup> slowly taking place. Therefore, it is increasingly likely that the future for which Canada<sup>4</sup> and other OECD nations are planning – a future that essentially extends Industrial Culture and consciousness to the ends of the earth – will not be the actual future we will get.

Now the good news: There is opportunity here. It is possible for Canada (or Finland or..) to become the most influential mid-sized nation in the world, if we could come to commit ourselves to the new work of understanding and capitalizing on the long-term societal change, evolution and transformation in which we now find ourselves in ways that no nation now advocates or practices. Canada (or Finland or..) can become the world's first 21<sup>st</sup> Century nation – the leading country that is aligning all that we are and do with the best that we are coming to know about the nature of evolution, truth, authority, persons, communities, science, wealth creation and reality itself.

It follows that the most pressing strategic question that emerges from this paper is this:

***“Is the official reading of history: that we face an essentially familiar future – a reading that underlies and informs virtually all intention, action and planning in every sector of Canadian, indeed Western society – grounded and sound or is it an understandable, but future-threatening, case of overshoot – continuing to believe and behave as we have in the past long after the conditions that justified such behaviour have changed?”***

The threat of this question is deepened by the fact that, as of now, we in Canada have no basis for deciding – other than our cultural biases and personal convictions. The reason is that it is no one's ongoing responsibility to ask, explore or answer this question with authority. In fact, we know of no research centre anywhere in the world that is charged with responsibility for understanding and shedding light on what we call the *cultural framing question*. Nowhere is there a government that takes this question with the seriousness that it deserves. All assume that a *better* version of what they already are, will serve them well tomorrow. Try as we might, we found no example of officially sanctioned futures researchers who were grappling in a sustained way with what we call the *cultural framing question*. No scan suggests that our cultural project may need to change in the face of long-term profound societal change, evolution and transformation. Indeed, most scans do not even attend to changes in human consciousness. This underlying issue is also absent from all of the many lists of the top ten or twenty problems facing us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

We observe that the future of humankind depends on the positive outcomes to three great uncertainties – two of which are clearly in our own minds, hearts and hands to determine. Asked as questions, they are:

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- (1) *Will the core project that informs and animates whole societies remain as it is now or will a new cultural project emerge?* Our point is that this question is not a live question in any society. Rather, the vast majority of future-oriented work assumes and does not challenge the deeply held cultural project of its own society. When they say, “*Our way of life is not negotiable*”, both bin Laden and George W Bush speak for virtually all 6.5 billion of us. Even ‘sustainable development’ is becoming code for, “*How do we keep the present game going?*” To this end all else is sacrificed.
- (2) *How generous will the physical environment of the planet be to humankind?* That the generosity of the planet has been a critical factor in the success of *Homo Sapiens* is beyond doubt. What is not clear is how much longer this will be the case and the degree to which this question is in our hands. The fact is, it may already be too late. But if it is not, then human action may yet be effective. While we do not despise what is being done today, we note that everywhere it lacks any widely-supported sense of urgency. The message from every democratic government to its citizens is still, “*We have work to do, but there is no need to disturb our lives. So sleep on while those of us in authority fix what is wrong.*” There is no question in our mind that this will change. However the timing is open for speculation – will it be before or after the evidence for global or continental ecological disaster is unmistakable?
- (3) *Will the quality of leadership offered by powerful and influential nations be informed by 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> Century realities?* Given the above, it is not surprising that no country, as yet, is led by persons who grasp, have digested and welcome the fact that ours is one of those few times in human history during which a truly profound deviation from the established societal norm is taking place. This is even less surprising, given that no generation of leaders, anywhere, has been raised with this instruction, “*Remember, when you are in mid-life, at the height of your capabilities, you will have to learn to do something no generation has ever done before – see the whole set of cultural presuppositions on the basis of which your achievements rest and evaluate their adequacy to your future in light of the changes that are taking place both within and around you.*”

Rather, everywhere, our leaders speak of tomorrow, while their dreams and those of their citizens, are shaped by the concepts, metaphors, logic and assumptions of yesterday. This cross-threading between the future our leaders offer and the one actually emerging among us is, in our view, the source of much of the distrust, distress, dissatisfaction and mental illness that is becoming a world-wide phenomenon. While citizens cannot articulate clearly what they want, the intuition is growing everywhere that “*something has gone wrong*”. While many can and do achieve brave things in small pieces, such accomplishments do not and cannot add up to an adequate response to the strategic challenges of our times.

We have said that as it stands today, no culture, including our own, has the capacity to see, think through and act coherently as a culture in the face of the conditions that are emerging within and around us. Rather, every country is still trying to force the new wine of its emerging situation into the old wineskins of its existing culture. As things stand now, no culture has been, or is, prepared for profound change that is emergent and non-linear. To the extent that ours is a time of such change, we, too, are unprepared.

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However, if ours is a rare time of profound societal change and we are becoming aware of this fact, then this knowledge creates obligations – as knowledge has always done. As the American poet, Drew Dellinger, says in his *Hieroglyphic Stairway*, “*What did you do once you knew?*”

So we face a truly strategic challenge: If it is no longer acceptable to assume and work within the familiar and comforting cultural frame of reference of Industrial consciousness and culture, what is to be done?

In our view, it is this: At least one country must take up the work of becoming the first nation to openly transform itself into a truly post-Industrial society and economy. This will involve exploring, mapping and learning to utilize the emerging metaphors, logics and frames of reference that are even now transforming us. In Canada this is defined as the *Creating Tomorrow Foundation Challenge*.<sup>5</sup> Which country will be the first to take it up?

Tragically, if we continue to engage in our normal democratic behaviour – waiting until the signs of profound societal and environmental change have become so obvious any one can see them – there will not likely be time to save human existence as reasonably prosperous, graceful and humane.

In light of all of the above, it appears that, unfortunately, Yehezkel Dror is far closer to the mark than any democratic government would have us believe. Sadly, neither ethnically-based identity politics, nor those of modern retail democracy have the capacity to accurately assess our place in history or to lead us, first, into the truth about it and then through the pain and despair of the desert of that truth into a truly new and more promising future. Rather, if you scratch under the paint of the brave talk of innovation and change, you find an age-old conviction, “*We can compete our way to the future through more innovation; that a better version of what we already are we serve our tomorrows well.*” Would that this were true; tragically, it is not.



## II Democracy as a Developmental Project

**The only way to grow is up!**

Michael Nelson  
1980

We introduce this Section by summarizing our argument with a different metaphor. For the first time in history, the conditions we in the West face require that, as whole societies, we grow up into a full adult maturity. As societies it is no longer enough for some to achieve a deep maturity in a society that is overwhelmingly pre-adolescent or adolescent in its dominant consciousness, thought and behaviour. Rather, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century requires that we develop an ever-deeper personal and societal maturity – to the point that we become self-critically self-aware. Only a self-critically, self-aware, post-egoistic and gratification deferring consciousness is able to even make sense of, let alone respond to, the culture-frame breaking conditions that are emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Sadly, today, no society meets this standard; to our knowledge none yet aspires to it.

Given the inability of democracies as we now know them to cope with profound historic change, a new understanding of democracy is needed. The transformation we require will include, transcend and transform, rather than replace, our established understandings. Our commitment will still to a universal adult franchise remains; but this feature will no longer be definitive of democracy.

Put simply, the human journey, both individual and societal, can be seen as moving from dependence with its core virtue of conformity, to independence with its core virtue of freedom, to interdependence with its core virtue of mutual respect informed by self-critical awareness.

Mutual respect is that quality of human consciousness, thought and conduct that senses, acknowledges, includes, attends to and responds to an “other” appropriately – for who or what it truly has been, is and can yet become. Respect entails a future-orientation. In the face of respect, all life flourishes; as persons we are truly alive. When respect is withheld, we wither. In a world as dynamic and complex as ours, only a self-critically, self-aware mutual respect will do.

If we re-conceive democracy as a historic developmental project that tracks this journey, what will follow?

- Mutual respect, informed by self-critical self awareness, will be seen as the new heart of democracy. Developing these capacities will be seen not only an inherently good thing to do, but, as we have seen, as an achievement that is required of us if the human species is to survive beyond and thrive throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- Democracy will be seen as a capacity of human persons, groups, societies and cultures that admits of degrees. We can speak of more or less democratic situations and of shallow vs. deep democracies. The point of human development is to always be moving

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towards the latter. So our families, communities, churches and corporations can be properly said to be more or less democratic to the degree they are more or less respectful and self-critically aware.

- An ever-deeper democracy will be accepted as both the source of and a requirement for human life that is full and truly sustainable. It is a necessary condition, a *sine qua non*. In this light, the development of a “freedom-loving people” is an achievement to be honoured. But, contrary to our present imagination of our work of history, it is not the end of the road. The new work this new century requires of us is that of transforming ourselves from *freedom-loving* to *mutually respectful and self-aware* people.
- All democracies will be judged by the degree to which all of its processes, relationships, action, patterns of thought and perceptions in every area of life are respectful – both public and private. It may not sound like much to say that henceforth we will *respect*, rather than *protect*, the environment or that nurturing human *respect*, rather than demanding human *rights*, will now be our focus. However, these shifts are as transforming as learning to call adult females *women*, rather than *chicks*.
- As with persons, we will expect every society to be democratic in a way that is consistent with its present stage of development on the overarching human journey. As with persons, no society will be encouraged to forever be just what they already are. As with persons, all societies will be called and expected to engage in the continuing work of moving on towards a stage of maturity which they have not yet achieved. As with persons, we will be more concerned with the direction of the journey than the speed of progress, and we will be alert to the dangers of trying to move too quickly.
- The work of becoming more democratic will never be done. An ever deeper democracy can always be achieved if we will but do the work and pay the price.

These things are easy to say, but we know of no nation or international development body that is now able to shape its foreign or internal development policy, let alone its social and economic policy, in these terms.

## Closing Comments

These, then, are core elements in our historical situation, as we see it:

Relative to our stage of development as human beings and whole cultures, the evidence is growing that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be more demanding of us than any in history. In 2006, there are 6.4 billion persons on Earth who through no fault of their own still overwhelmingly expect and are working for a future that cannot be achieved. By and large, their leaders share their illusions. We are, truly *in over our heads* and well beyond, “*Houston, we have a problem.*”

Our situation is dangerous. However, the human story need not end in tragedy. It is neither mysterious nor surprising that up to now no civilization has ever been able to see, let alone alter,

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its most deeply held unconscious assumptions about itself and the world around it. Few have even been faced with this challenge as a requirement for their continued survival. To date, all who have; have failed. Consider that there is no warrant in any spiritual or intellectual tradition for accepting responsibility for shaping the on-going evolution of one's whole culture. Rather, every tradition assumes the culture and teaches humane living within it. We are urged to *feed the hungry* and *clothe the naked*. For most, even the thought of accepting human responsibility for the on-going evolution of the culture is not merely unthinkable; it is heretical and ungodly.

Nevertheless, our situation is not hopeless. As noted above, while it is not widely understood, we are already 200 years into the work of transforming and moving beyond Industrial consciousness and culture. A new sensibility can be seen in dozens of places, including the philosophy of science, post-Newtonian science, modern liberation struggles, hermeneutics, humanistic psychology, literary criticism and intimate human relations. Tens of millions of people are already struggling out of their inherited world-views and committing themselves to the journey of living as co-creators of their own bodies, lives, families, communities and cultures. That there is no robust infrastructure to support this work globally, only points to work to be done; that none of us know how to "*do whole countries*" only means that as with NASA in 1961, we must learn our way into the future.

In order to sustain hope, the *Creating Tomorrow Foundation Challenge* must be embraced – by 2020 at least one country must openly, knowingly and responsibly have committed to the journey of becoming more deeply democratic; and this commitment will be seen as a major dimension of being the pathfinder of the future – the world's first country to align itself with the emerging character and requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. That at least one country will make this commitment, we are confident. But which it will be is unknown. Is taking up this challenge your work and calling? We hope so. It is ours.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Rule No. 1 is "*Context is King – the historical conditions set the rules.*" Rule No. 2 is, "*While we are not directly responsible for the condition of the historical conditions, we are responsible for reading the river of change, steering and paddling.*" Rule No. 3 is, "*Humility is warranted; false confidence is fatal.*"

<sup>2</sup> *Strategic Opportunities and Challenges Facing Canada and the World in the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ruben Nelson and David Harries, Foresight Canada, July, 2005. Not yet released as a publication.

<sup>3</sup> The verb is critical. Central to our claim is that we are already 200 years into a cultural transformation that will take another 200 years to play out and that, as whole societies, we are not yet aware of this fact. Think of living in Europe in 1400, a time we now call the Renaissance. Given the changes in human consciousness and technology

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that had already taken place, we can now see that it was only a matter of time before what we call an Industrial culture would emerge. Yet, no one ran around in the 15th Century claiming to live at the birth of a new age. The old realities were too obvious and the new almost wholly invisible to 15<sup>th</sup> Century eyes. So it is with us.

4 What is said here of Canada, for good and ill, can also be said of most late-modern societies. The strategic opportunities and threats of this moment of history are democratic – they include us all. We speak only of Canada. We do not presume to speak for others. However, we know that there are tens of millions of citizens who would welcome our acknowledgement of the character of this moment in history.

5 See [www.creatingtomorrow.ca](http://www.creatingtomorrow.ca)