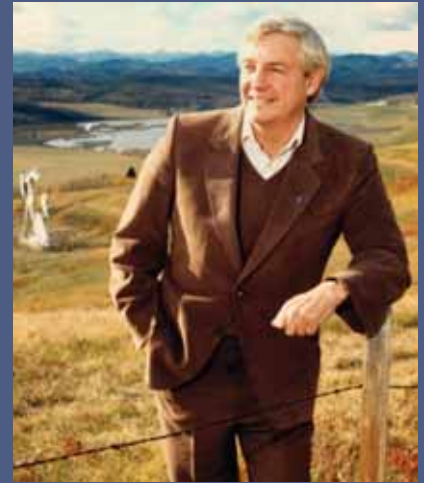


ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Robin V. Sears

In their time on the federal-provincial and interprovincial stages, premiers like Lougheed and Davis, Blakeney, McKenna and Bourassa defended the interests of their provinces while participating in national conversations. There is no premier of their stature today, and their standing as both provincial and national figures has only increased with time. Robin Sears writes that all their successors stand on the shoulders of giants.

Du temps où ils dominaient les relations fédérales-provinciales et intergouvernementales, les Lougheed, Davis, Blakeney, McKenna et Bourassa défendaient les intérêts de leur province tout en participant au dialogue national. On cherche en vain de nos jours des chefs provinciaux de cette envergure, dont le temps n'a fait qu'accroître le prestige. La tâche est rude pour leurs successeurs qui doivent se mesurer à pareils géants, observe Robin Sears.



It is painfully clichéd to bemoan the missing giants on today's political stage. Nostalgia and weak memory erase many sins. Pundits unanimously rue the political pygmies who have replaced the legendary premiers and first ministers of the recent past. Our predecessors mourned the absence of Sir John A. a century ago, and a new Laurier a generation later.

This time there may be more than the mists of history at play. One can see a real decline in the stature and status of this generation's political leaders. There are, however, two reality checks that are useful in making a fair assessment. First today's "historical giant" rarely held that status during their active political life. For every Pierre Trudeau there was a Joe Clark, and after 1980 even Trudeau was a highly divisive figure to many Quebecers and western Canadians. History's golden glow buffs the reputations of many former political figures — especially those like Peter Lougheed and Bill Davis who have lived long enough in their postpolitical career to become universally cherished sages.

But the second reason is more specific, the product of a time and a circumstance now long past. Two generations of Canadians grew up watching our political leaders seated at giant circular conference tables debating pensions and medicare, tax policy and resource development. Several dozen ministers and first ministers debated policy for hours and appeared on newspaper front pages and television screens from the 1950s through the 1990s.

Stars among them were the iconic premiers of their era: John Robarts and Davis; Jean Lesage, René Lévesque and Robert Bourassa; and the Bennetts — Wacky and Bill. A series

of prairie premiers punched far above their weight throughout these years. Representing provinces with small populations but great ambition, Premiers Tommy Douglas, Allan Blakeney and Roy Romanow from Saskatchewan; Ed Shreyer, Gary Filmon and Gary Doer from Manitoba; and Peter Lougheed and Ralph Klein from Alberta were usually at the centre of winning coalitions on the central political battles of that era.

From Victoria in 1971 through the collapse of Charlottetown in 1992 the constitutional battles dominated, but first ministers' conferences on health, transportation and finance were also regular parts of the news agenda. Jean Chrétien put an end to it, recognizing that 13 provinces and territories were always more likely to make common cause with each other than Ottawa. He detested first ministers' meetings and stopped hosting them. Stephen Harper rarely meets any of his provincial colleagues with the exception of brief one-on-one meetings.

Perhaps it is for that reason that a premier as estimable in oratorical skill and vision as Brad Wall occupies a far smaller place on the national stage than the Saskatchewan greats of a generation ago. Even Premiers Dalton McGuinty and Jean Charest, savvy veteran leaders of provinces used to being at the core every national political debate, are rarely seen outside their own provinces any more.

The Council of the Federation created by the provinces, partly out of frustration at the collapse of the regular cycle of first ministers' consultations, is ignored by Ottawa and most of the media and has yet to find its place as a relevant institution in national political life. Like the summer Premiers' Conferences it replaces, the council is more useful

as a bonding and coalition-building vehicle for the premiers and their key ministers and staffs than it is an institution for promoting national political dialogue.

Part from the diminution of the importance of premiers to Canadians within and beyond their own provinces, this new vacuum is not

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healthy in a political federation. As executive-led government is more and more dominated by the centre, with all but a handful of senior ministers in each government playing an increasingly ceremonial role, the absence of meaningful public discussion forums between governments further isolates and concentrates power.

The decision of the Harper government to announce by press conference the size of the health care cheque it planned to write to the provinces for the next decade was a new low in federal provincial decision-sharing. Record deficits, an aging population and health care budgets rising at twice the rate of inflation would seem to merit a national debate at the level of first ministers.

The Harper government's claim that it is respecting the division of constitutional powers — the provinces have exclusive responsibility for health care delivery — rings a little hollow given its willingness to unilaterally impose new costs and obligations on the provinces in the punishment regimes set out in its new crime legislation.

In any event, it is a spurious argument to suggest that intergovernmental dialogue tramples on the division of powers. However much Ottawa may resent preening premiers using the national stage to make their case on big issues, surely Canadians benefit from the opportunity to witness the

debate. The federal government using its traditional convenor role is free to invite any group of Canadians, including governments, to discuss in a round-table environment issues they believe have national import.

No, Harper has adopted Chrétien's allergy for similar reasons. It is less for reasons of constitutional discretion than political anxiety that he denies

first ministers their hours of TV attention. Those nationally witnessed discussions can move much less controllably on to the next stage — standards setting, joint recommendations, even shared agreements — a dangerous process that would make unilateral federal imposition of its edict much more costly politically.

Quebec, the traditionally hesitant partner in such national dialogues, is free to make its own choices today on energy policy as it was on pensions and tax collection a generation ago. That does not and should not preclude their invitation to and participation in such forums. Excluding the remaining governments from any consensus-seeking dialogue enhances rather than restricts their freedom of decision-making.

At a time when issues on a planetary scale — climate change and the impacts of globalization, as well as those on a national and provincial level — health care, education policy — it is sad that the visibility of leaders at those levels is sliding. Curiously, the profile of big city municipal politicians is rising. It may be that the sense of powerlessness beyond the community level causes many voters to focus on the issues directly under their noses, and the leaders responsible for them. Or it may be that the impact of municipal decisions on garbage or transit or property taxes is so much more visible that voters focus on those responsible for them.

Still it must grind their various provincial competitors that mayors such as Rob Ford and David Miller before him, Naheed Nenshi and Gregor Robertson have profiles at least as high as provincial premiers.

Then there is the shrinking of traditional channels of communication. It is hard enough for a provincial premier, federal minister or any politician — including prime ministers and premiers — to win the attention of the media and therefore the public today. Gone are the dedicated political columnists and beat reporter cum policy experts in the media.

Press galleries at provincial legislatures are today made up of a handful of reporters, very young men and women often tasked to manage other news files simultaneously. The National Press Gallery is a shadow of its former self in numbers and expertise. And the numbers of newspaper readers or television news viewers who report much interest in serious news about government policy decisions — as opposed to gotcha coverage of mistresses, missing money or any other monkey business — is small and shrinking.

An ambitious young politician today may be a high-volume tweeter, a frequent star in staged YouTube videos and a regular on the community event circuit, and he or she will still have a hard time getting the attention and profile of his predecessors in the post-war era. Canadian high school students of a generation ago could probably name several current or former premiers, from their own province and neighbours. The fact that this is much less true today is less their fault than the real decline in the visibility of political leadership today. Better use of new tools and new channels is required.

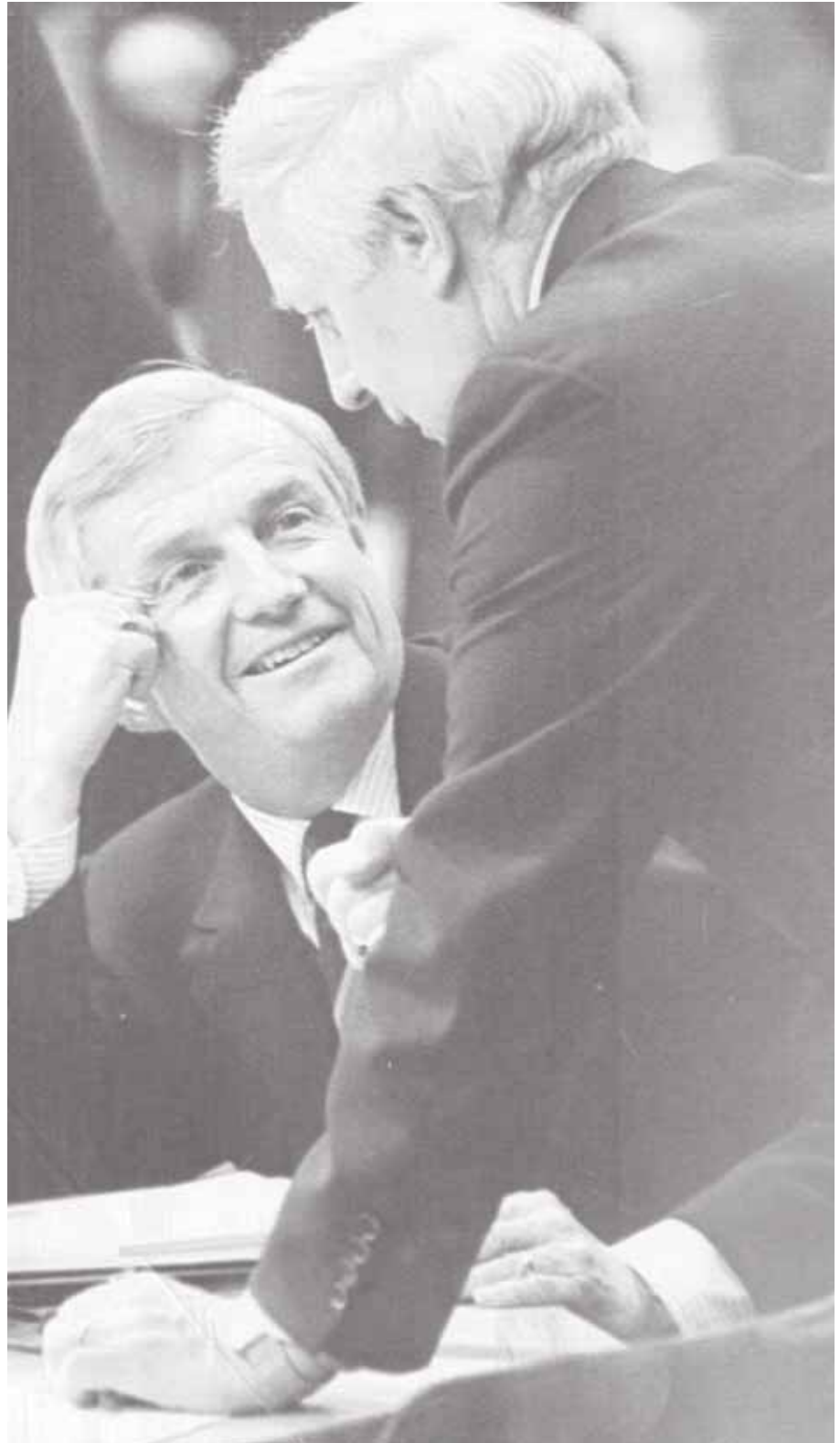
It would be hard to argue, objectively, that a premier of the obvious intelligence and appeal of an Alison Redford is less deserving of a national profile than Ralph Klein, or that Darrell Dexter is not of John Buchanan or Gerald Regan stature. Yet, today,

arguing the case for provincial control for resource revenues would have been a challenge for even a Peter Lougheed or an Allan Blakeney. Appearing on political talk shows and penning persuasive op-ed commentaries is not the same as appearing on the national stage, with your peers, on national television night after night.

Today's provincial leaders do stand on the shoulders of giants. Canada was exceptionally well-served by the calibre of the men and women who led their provinces to huge new roles in every arena of policy in the past 50 years. It is not unfair to be proud of their quality, their statesmanship and their achievements in comparison with all but a handful of their gubernatorial peers to the south. The community harmony legacy across linguistic and religious divides that Louis Robichaud and Richard Hatfield bequeathed their successors was invaluable and far from certain before their work. Bill Davis' legacy is diverse and impressive, perhaps nowhere more than in the massive building out of the province's educational infrastructure under his leadership. Not only were Peter Lougheed and Allan Blakeney and Roy Romanow the architects of the biggest constitutional compromise of a generation — albeit flawed and still incomplete — they also established new understandings of where federal and provincial resource tax boundaries begin and end.

None of this is to say that today's generation of leaders is of lesser calibre, nor that the issues they will wrestle with will have lesser impacts on our futures. However, it is a sad observation that unless some things change significantly, they will receive much less attention, support and eventual celebration for their efforts than the giants of another generation.

There are several possible remedies to ensure that Canadians get to observe and to participate in the great political decisions of today, and that Canada's provincial leaders have voice and impact on those decisions with their own voters and with voters from coast to coast. The



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Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed and Nova Scotia Premier John Buchanan have a friendly word during a break in the First Ministers' Conference on the economy in Regina in February 1985. Robin Sears writes that the absence of premiers from the national stage is a direct result of successive prime ministers downgrading and doing away with federal-provincial conferences.

first is perhaps to recall that one of the seminal events of the “golden era” was not an officially convened first ministers’ meeting. The Confederation of Tomorrow conference, staged by the team of Robarts and Davis, was a person-

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al project that came to take on national and serious policy impact.

The ability of events such as this, using their own media channels and feedback tools, could be of even greater impact than 50 years ago, if the right combination of heavyweight attendance, serious preparation and political theatre were applied. It is not hard to envisage a national political discussion, convened by several of the great universities, funded by corporate and foundation donors, on health care or post-secondary education, for example.

A policy foundation or postgraduate school could act as the convenor, with the support of governments, or the Council of the Federation could take on the task of staging one major event a year such as this on a key issue of national concern. A model of this type is the work done by the Munk School, the federal government and various foundations in preparing the now annual security policy conferences held in Canada. Those events have been a little too cognoscenti oriented, but there is no reason they could not adopt more inclusive social media tools to broaden their impact.

A second device, widely used in Canadian policy development, has been the travelling political road show, whether a royal commission or a Commons committee or a specially designated task force. The ability of provincial leaders and their partners to overcome the barriers of time zones and distance have never been greater than today. Fully interactive electronic dia-

logue with Canadians, broadcast live on dedicated Internet channels, is now feasible and no longer prohibitively expensive.

If several provinces wanted to generate a broader discussion of pension

reform issues, for example, convening a series of policy round tables in one provincial capital after another, chaired by its premier and driven by a combination of business, labour, academic and bureaucratic participants, with the ability of pensioners and their families to present, could make for riveting debate and policy consultation. Given the federal government’s precedent in the health funding arena, it might be prudent to convene such a national dialogue in advance of a preemptive strike by Ottawa.

Across the developed world three trends continue to intersect that are damaging to democratic governance as it has been lived for more than a century. The first is the decline in the channels of communication available to governments and their leaders through the mainstream media. The second is the secular decline in the number of citizens who bother to vote.

A third more nascent discussion concerns “genuine public consultation” mechanisms. Canada is a leader in this discussion with several of its international champions based here. Don Lenihan, a guru among them, published this year the third in his trilogy of thoughtful essays on the meaning and mechanisms of more genuine public consultation, *Rescuing Policy: The Case for Public Engagement*.

With a series of colleagues drawn from Canada, the US and Australia, he makes an impassioned case that declining political interest among voters and timorous policy-making by the bureaucracy can be addressed only by

a more robust, partly electronic consultation process. As a modern analogue to the power of community consensus building through town hall debates, Lenihan argues that broader support for tougher policy choices will become possible.

Lenihan is surely correct in identifying declining party participation, voter turnout and media interest as inimical to path-breaking policy courage. In a political environment where vote suppres-

sion is seen as the path to victory, it is not likely there will be broad coalitions built for innovative new policy direction.

A soothing narrative from some observers is that voter turnout does not matter, totalitarian governments can show 90 percent turnouts and that does not confer legitimacy. However foolish such analogies may be, the impacts of low turnout on democratic legitimacy is real.

A government proposing to go to war, to change the delivery of essential services like health and education, to significantly raise or shift tax burdens, can hardly claim it has a mandate based on a 35 percent electoral turnout. Even if that turnout is closer to 50 percent, but divided among several parties, the ability to mobilize a community behind a big and challenging project is compromised.

If tomorrow’s political giants are to gain the profile and therefore the public credibility to win support for what may be difficult changes in access to health care or education, infrastructure or public sector reform, they will need to find ways to make better use of the new tools and channels of communication. Some will be built on the foundation of traditional vehicles — public conferences and round tables — some will be new interactive mechanisms we can only imagine today.

We surely want to avoid the wasted decades societies such as Japan have suffered. Ducking the changes needed to pull their citizens out of the slow spiral they have endured is a product of failing

to re-ignite political dialogue and consensus using these new tools. Several European countries — over many years and many governments — also kicked the can down the road on productivity and tax policy, labour and professional reform, until the bond market stepped in and forced painful change. Those hostages to fortune were created by avoiding serious consultation to build deep

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consensus on changes that were obvious many years before they became a crisis.

Along with Australia, Canada has whistled past the graveyard since the great 2008 crash. Insulated by our booming resource revenues and our historic caution, we avoided both massive employment collapse and defaults in the financial system. Those successes mask two serious ongoing structural challenges — the rise of the dollar as a petro currency and the slide in high-value-added manufacturing.

As Don Drummond tried to impress on the Ontario government, its deficit nightmare is not cyclical, it is structural. Ontario will not see a swathe of low-value-added manufacturing jobs, protected by a 25 percent currency advantage, return.

In the ironies of history department, Bob Rae did not believe his advisers who assured him that his deficit nightmare was not structural but cyclical. He concluded stimulus and reform were essential. He bravely tried to add public-sector reform — the social contract — to his stimulus spending and got kicked in the teeth by his putative allies. His recession was cyclical, however. If he had spent less, tried to reform less and held his breath, the US recovery might have saved his government.

Twenty years later his successors are making the same mistake — in reverse. Ontario rejects the argument

that its problems are deep and structural and has therefore done a lot of stimulus and very little reform. They and their officials are wrong, as well. Ontario's problems today are the definition of structural — recovery without reform will be weak and slow.

Quebec has ambitious plans for its northern development, pumping up the next generation's power and commodi-

ty export revenues. But it, too, has a massive debt, deficit and a declining manufacturing sector. Western Canada is booming — so long as China's hunger for oil, coal, potash and lumber is insatiable. But a series of governments in the prairies and BC have mostly failed to convert that wealth into more sustainable high-value-added jobs.

Neither Dwight Duncan nor Jim Flaherty, the two finance ministers with the biggest problems and the greatest opportunities, failed to seize the nettle in their budgets this time. Each took the freeze, trim and universal haircut approach to cuts, avoiding the serious structural reforms that could deliver real benefits over time.

Virtually every region of Canada has serious fiscal challenges dragging it down today or on the horizon. Every region of Canada has unsustainable expenditures in both health and post-secondary education, and huge but unsatisfied infrastructure spending requirements from highways to transit to high-speed digital networks.

Projects of this type will require rebuilding provincial, regional and national consensus for new spending, which means new revenues — in other words, taxes. Let's stop pretending that spending cuts alone, or new revenues alone — the classic left/right lightswitch — is the answer. Equally

essential is tackling the systemic waste in the public sector. Nineteenth-century organizational structures imported from Westminster, combined with insanely overlapping programs in policy, funding and delivery systems, built up layer by layer over decades are in desperate need of pruning and redesign. Over time they have deeply undermined public confidence in public-sector service delivery.

These shakeups will mean many losers. This new spending will mean many unhappy taxpayers. Neither project can be avoided if Canada is going to tackle its secular R&D productivity decline.

Yet none will be attempted let alone achieved without strong, determined and popular leaders, in the prime minister's and the premiers' offices and in the bureaucracy. It is hard to see today's "giants" capable of mustering such coalitions of support. There are exceptions — Alison Redford one hopes, Brad Wall possibly, Darrell Dexter probably — who have the spine and the vision to take on big change.

In Canada, it will mainly be premiers, alone and with other provincial partners, who will need to build the consensus to make serious change. This federal government has signalled it is not interested in national agenda projects, outside of defence and perhaps the Arctic.

Let us hope today's premiers, and their advisers, study the old videos of the era of giants, the premiers who year after year used the national stage to build coalitions of support to win big changes. They have new tools and new stages to achieve the same successes.

They should seize them and then lead the construction of a 21st century Canada.

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