ACTION CANADA

Building Leadership for Canada's Future

Policy Perspectives

Opinion Articles
by the 2006/2007
Action Canada Fellows

Canada

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Introduction

Communicating relevant, timely opinions and ideas to the public is an important skill in shaping public policy. That's why Action Canada works with Fellows to develop their skills to write for publication, especially op-ed articles to appear in national and local newspapers.

Getting published and being persuasive in print is challenging. In 2006/2007, eminent Canadian journalists Andrew Cohen, Alain Dubuc, Stephen Hume, Roy MacGregor, Jacquie McNish, and Jeffrey Simpson shared with Fellows their insights on writing and gave them feedback on what they had written. As well, Action Canada writing mentors Dr. Mark Winston, Academic Director of Simon Fraser University's Centre for Dialogue and Dr. Antonia Maioni, Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, worked intensively with Fellows to develop their writing skills.

We introduced op-ed writing skills to the Action Canada program two years ago, and since then numerous Fellows have had their articles published in major Canadian newspapers. I am pleased to present in this compilation the 2006/2007 Fellows' op-ed articles. They demonstrate how this group of emerging leaders views major issues facing our country.

Cathy Beehan
Chief Executive Officer
Action Canada

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Published 22 May 2007 in the Toronto Star.

I've been bullfrogged, and not by a child leaping over my back or a frog kissing my cheek. I switched my home electricity source to renewable energy, and am now technically bullfrogpowered™.

Bullfrogpower is Ontario's first 100% green electricity retailer, selling renewable energy from low-impact sources such as hydro and wind power. Launched in 2006, Bullfrogpower provides a new way for Ontarians to support renewable electricity rather than sticking to conventional coal and nuclear alternatives. The Bullfrog Founders Club includes hundreds of ordinary families, as well as Tragically Hip's Gord Downie, former Toronto Mayor David Crombie and author Margaret Atwood.

Why are alternatives like Bullfrogpower important? We are a resource-rich and prosperous society, but face the biggest challenges of our civilization – climate change and the need to move away from diminishing and polluting fossil fuel energy sources. Citizen and government awareness are key if we are to mitigate these challenges successfully, but understanding the problem will not be enough. We need action to implement solutions.

On the citizen front, Bullfrogpower gives consumers a choice. We've been able to buy green cars, fair-trade food, and organic clothing for awhile, and now green energy is available, too. There is a catch: the premium. Bullfrogpower is approximately 30% more expensive than your local utility. Switching over will add about $1 a day to the average homeowner's electricity bill.

Should consumers have to pay more? If climate change is our most serious challenge, shouldn't government set the table so that green power costs the same or less than conventional energy? Canada requires substantial investment in renewable energy sources to curb our greenhouse gas emissions and grow in a sustainable fashion. We need a national renewable energy strategy, with clear targets, timelines and implementation plans to achieve this.

Government has a key role in ensuring that green energy is priced appropriately. Policies need to be changed so that non-renewable and renewable energy projects are put on a level playing field. Right now oil and gas companies receive preferential treatment over greener energy sources.

Green energy would be encouraged if government established incentives to transform the market, by decreasing subsidies for oil, gas, and coal and increasing incentives for clean technologies and renewable energy sources. Legislation could mandate increasing percentages of greener fuel and electricity sources to create a large, steady demand for renewable energy. Governments also must lead by example through their purchase of green power, and review procurement processes to ensure that this takes place at all levels.

Green energy would be encouraged if government established incentives to transform the market...

Together, these policies will establish a positive investment environment for the research and infrastructure needed to grow renewable industries.

We've seen the price of a barrel of oil skyrocket in recent years, profiting non-green companies in the short term but also suggesting that green businesses soon will be able to provide competitively priced goods as oil and natural gas prices rise. This emerging opportunity hasn't gone unnoticed by venture capitalists. In 2006, North American venture capitalists invested $2.9 billion in clean technologies, or "cleantech," representing a 78% increase over 2005. More investors could get bullish on green companies, providing increased investment capital, and allowing entrepreneurs to bring green goods and services to market.

Even mega-sized companies are responding to green demand. Wal-Mart Canada, an unlikely greenie, is purchasing 39,000 MWhrs of green power from Bullfrogpower over a three year period, the largest commercial purchase of green power in Ontario's history. Recently RBC Royal

Bank announced three additional branches have become bullfrogpowered, bringing the number of bullfrogpowered RBC Royal Bank locations in the GTA to twelve.

And no wonder companies are taking note. A new poll by Environics Research Group shows that two-thirds of Canadians are likely to switch to banks, stores and other retail or service outlets that demonstrate a commitment to green policies. In addition, seventy-five percent of Canadians said they are likely to fill their shopping carts with more environmentally friendly goods and services, even if it means paying a premium price. This is the first snapshot demonstrating that Canadians view companies not just by what they sell, but on their commitment to the environment.

Looks like Canada is ready for bullfrog mania.

Jane Ambachtsheer

Jane Ambachtsheer is a National Partner of Mercer Investment Consulting, based in Toronto. She leads Mercer's global responsible investment business, and consults to investors in North America, Europe and Australasia. In March 2000, Jane joined Mercer Investment Consulting's London office, and transferred to Toronto three years later. Prior to joining Mercer, Jane worked for the pension benchmarking firm CEM, in Amsterdam and Toronto. Jane was consultant to the United Nations through the development of the Principles for Responsible Investment. She is a global advisor to the Carbon Disclosure Project, and sits on the board of the Canadian Social Investment Organisation. In 2005, Jane was recognised by Global Proxy Watch as one of the top 10 "Architects of Governance." Jane holds a Bachelor of Economics and English literature with honours from York University, and a Master of Social Science from the University of Amsterdam. She is a faculty member at the University of Toronto, where she co-teaches a graduate course on responsible investment.

Subsidizing Multinationals: Our Governments Have No Choice

Caroline Charest

Many people consider that our governments are too generous toward multinationals that invest in Canada. Most recently, protests were raised when Quebec granted financial assistance to Ubisoft and Alcan. But do our governments really have a choice? In a context of globalization and capital mobility, such assistance policies are crucial for stimulating job and wealth creation.

Quebec and Canada offer significant competitive advantages: an educated and specialized labour force, proximity to American markets, abundant energy, and production costs that are often lower than in the United States. But today, these advantages are no longer sufficient.

In 2007, emerging countries are competing in sectors that, until recently, were almost exclusively reserved to countries in the Northern Hemisphere—notably, accounting, engineering services and advanced research. Thanks to substantial inflows of capital and rapidly rising levels of wealth and education, these countries are no longer merely a source of cheap and plentiful labour: in 2005, India produced some 350 000 engineers, while salaries there remain significantly lower than those in Canada. Besides having this new competitor to contend with, Canada is in direct competition with the European Union and the United States. These major economies have far greater financial resources with which to attract multinationals.

These governments give extraordinary assistance to certain industries, aerospace being a prime example. Since success in this sector depends on research and on the development of new products, countries that invest in military R&D indirectly subsidize their industry. For example, in the United States, nearly 50% of public spending in defence R&D goes to aerospace companies. In Canada, such spending is minimal. Employing over 40 000 people in Quebec and over 75 000 in Canada, the aerospace industry could never have developed without some other form of government participation. For this reason, in addition to managing the offsets of federal military contracts, our governments frequently support the large contractors—Pratt & Whitney, Bombardier, CAE, Bell Helicopter etc.—by participating in the financing of their airplane sales.

In other cases, a government may consider that an industry is essential, regardless of whether the territory offers a competitive advantage. This is the case with the financial sector, which provides jobs and capital and which plays a strategic role in the economic life of large cities. To counter the concentration of Canadian financial activities in Toronto and Vancouver, since 1987, Quebec has offered generous tax benefits to companies wishing to do business in Montréal, through the CFI-Montréal program. A cost-benefit analysis has shown that this program has contributed to the creation and retention of some 600 jobs, with economic spinoffs far surpassing the fiscal costs.

Quebec and Canada offer significant competitive advantages…But today, these advantages are no longer sufficient.

The desire to create an industrial cluster, such as Quebec's multimedia industry, can also justify generous fiscal and financial incentives. This sector, which in 2001 numbered nearly 500 employees, has in recent years been favoured by the Government with creation of the Cité du Multimédia (multimedia district) and tax credits of 37.5% on the payroll. The result: multimedia companies today account for more than 3500 employees in Quebec, an impressive growth indeed.

These interventions must however respect certain guidelines, and our governments have three major responsibilities toward taxpayers. First of all, they must ensure that the public always comes out the winner. A single financing arrangement may involve multiple governments, departments and agencies, resulting in such complexity that to weigh the incentives granted against the expected benefits. Secondly, governments have an obligation to negotiate the best "price" possible for their investment. They must resist the temptation to reach agreements quickly in order to make a politically beneficial announcement. Thirdly, in such negotiations, governments are representing citizens, so they must communicate their actions to the public clearly.

With regard to the first two responsibilities, the performance of our governments is difficult to evaluate. As for the third, it is frequently neglected. Greater transparency on the part of our governments, combined with a communications strategy based on the points raised in this article, would foster greater social acceptance of public funding for private investments.

This article was originally written in French.

Caroline Charest

Caroline Charest is interested in economic development issues, both at the national and international levels. With experience in provincial politics and in the private sector, where she worked as an analyst, economy and management, with SECOR Conseil, Caroline has acquired a solid knowledge or some key sectors of the Québec economy. In her free time, she endeavours to convince companies to adopt sustainable development practices. She has a Master in Science in Development Studies from the London School of Economics, a Master in Economics from the University of Montréal, as well as a Bachelor of Art, Administration, from HEC Montréal. During her studies, her research focused on fiscal imbalance and remuneration issues in Canada and on fiscal relations in Nepal. She also participated in a World Bank mission in Nepal. Caroline has been an active member of the Jeune Chambre de commerce de Montréal, where she is on a committee for the promotion of sustainable development in Montréal business circles. She is fluent in English, French and Spanish. She participated in two half-marathons and would like to run a full one next year.

Darren Fung

So there I was, at a screening at the Berlin International Film Festival, smug with pride. I was beaming with a newfound sense of patriotism, because one of the best films I had seen in a long time was Canadian.

That evening over a few beers, my fellow Canadian film buddies were taken aback with the enthusiasm of which I spoke of Bruce Macdonald's The Tracey Fragments. Warm fuzzy feelings were the taste of the day as I told my friends of the great reception the film received before a packed house. I was proud to be Canadian, and proud to be part of the Canadian film industry.

So why is it that Canadians are almost embarrassed about our cinema? We seem to associate our films with sleepy sixties-era National Film Board documentaries of snow blowing in Saskatchewan. Our default position is to assume that Canadian films are cheap and amateurish.

Canadians can make great films. The international success of our films is endless: Deepa Mehta's Water, Atom Egoyan's The Sweet Hereafter, Denys Arcand's Les Invasions Barbares, Jean-Marc Vallée's C.R.A.Z.Y., and Chris Landreth's Ryan. The sleepy documentary-making NFB has garnered more Academy Awards than any other institution in the world. The list of our accomplishments goes on and on.

We have great stories to share, but ask Joe Public what the last Canadian film he saw was, and he'll most likely shrug. Why?

In the seventies, the Canadian Radio-Television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) developed Canadian Content (CANCON) rules for the radio and television industries, without mandating similar rules for film. For these industries, CANCON rules sparked growth in their respective industries by ensuring access to the marketplace.

CANCON's absence in cinema allowed the Hollywood Studios to develop a stranglehold on our screens. The big studios now treat Canada as an extension of the "US Domestic" distribution region. Our films are forced to compete against the Hollywood blockbusters for screen time.

This hardly seems fair, given that Canadian film budgets are dwarfed by their Hollywood counterparts. Some argue that our movies need to be of higher quality in order to be competitive in this global environment. But what indicates quality is up for debate.

While there have been many expensive Hollywood flops, there have been just as many lower-budget success stories that have been produced, many coming from Canada. With little money for explosions, chase scenes, or flashy CG, Canadian filmmakers have learned to make up for their budgetary deficiencies with good storytelling.

Canadian filmmakers are trying to get their films seen in a country where foreign distributors monopolize the landscape and have little interest in sharing our stories.

Canadian filmmakers are trying to get their films seen in a country where foreign distributors monopolize the landscape and have little interest in sharing our stories. As a result, it is becoming harder and harder to break even, let alone trying to make money on our films.

CANCON rules will help create a market for our films and stimulate growth in our film industry.

But why should we care? For starters, the motion picture sector is a $2 billion industry in Canada that offers jobs and economic benefits to our country.

More importantly, our cultural products, whether they be television, literature, music, theatre, dance or film, are a reflection of our society and our values. Our stories provide us with a window in which we can contemplate how we can better ourselves and our nation.

Creating markets and generating revenues will lead to industry credibility, sustainability and growth. CANCON worked for Canada's music scene, allowing us to develop a large pool of talent that is now respected internationally. Names like Céline Dion, Bryan Adams, and Nickelback were developed in Canada before they grew into international stars.

It's not as easy as it looks though. In 1987, when Communications minister Flora MacDonald tried to introduce new CANCON rules for cinema, the Motion Picture Association of American convinced President Reagan to threaten the shutting down of Free Trade talks if the bill went ahead.

The Federal government needs to put on a brave face against the powerful Hollywood lobby. Ironically, NAFTA permits its signatories to impose barriers to protect its cultural industries.

New CANCON rules will not be the magic-bullet solution for every problem facing the Canadian film industry. However, it provides a great starting point that will allow the industry to grow into one that is both sustainable and vibrant.

Perhaps Canadian film icon Norman Jewison said it best when said "just tell a good story." Now we just have to figure out how to share those stories with Canadians.

Darren Fung
Darren Fung began composing music at age 15 through the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra's Young Composer's Project. He completed his Bachelor of Music degree at McGill in 2002, culminating with his tenure as composer-in-residence for the McGill Concert Choir. His works have been performed most notably by the Vancouver and Victoria Symphony Orchestras; Toronto's Tapestry New Opera Works; Orchestre de chambre I Musici de Montreal; the Altius Brass; Sofia's Philharmonia Bulgarica; and Prague's FILMharmonic Orchestra among others. His film scores have been heard in competition at major international film festivals around the world, including the 2005 Atlantic Festival where he won the award for Best Score. He is an alumnus of the prestigious ASCAP Film Scoring Workshop in Los Angeles, the Aspen Music Festival and School, and Tapestry's Composer-Librettist Laboratory. As an advocate for emerging composers, he currently serves as the youngest member of the board of directors for the Guild of Canadian Film Composers. Darren and his company, Stinky Rice Studios, have won numerous young entrepreneur awards, and are currently based out of Montreal.

Canada loses $1.6 billion every year because of its immigrants.

Your Lebanese taxi driver is an electrical engineer. Your Chinese dry cleaner is a chemist. And your friendly Indian corner store owner: she's a doctor.

Under-employment of immigrants is not a trivial issue; it disadvantages immigrants and their families, undermines the Canadian immigration program, and costs our economy $1.6 billion annually in lost productivity. Well educated, successful immigrants arrive in Canada to find that the skills for which they were recruited are being wasted.

Growth in our labour force will be due almost entirely to new immigrants by 2011, Statistics Canada reports. And immigrants already drive our population growth. Under-employment is not an immigrant problem; it's a Canadian problem.

My parents and I arrived in Canada in 1986 – our immigration papers granted in part because of my parents' education and skills. We were fortunate: my parents had enough capital to start a business and did not experience the vagaries of the employment market. Most immigrants are not so lucky.

New immigrants earn 30% less on average than Canadian-born employees entering the workforce. Yet, the proportion of immigrants arriving in the 1990s with at least one university degree was almost twice that of the Canadian-born population, according to a 2005 report published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy.

But why are qualified immigrants not being employed, or being under-employed?

We have been pointing the finger at professional regulatory bodies for requiring sometimes questionable "Canadian experience" before licensing a qualified new immigrant. Whether valid or not, these critiques are profession-specific. There are bigger, more widespread problems to face.

Employers often cannot evaluate immigrant educational qualifications, and perceive international experience as of lesser value than Canadian experience. They also may expect immigrants to require more training than other new employees.

There are subconscious biases at play – employers hire individuals like themselves. A different way of dressing, skin colour, accent, or manner is a disadvantage to an immigrant in a job interview.

Several initiatives are underway to reduce employers' negative stereotypes about immigrant employees. But the majority of these are language, integration or awareness programs, and do not create real incentives to hire skilled immigrants. There is still no "Immigrant Employment Strategy" in the same way as Canada has a Youth Employment Strategy.

Well educated, successful immigrants arrive in Canada to find that the skills for which they were recruited are being wasted.

Three simple components should form the backbone of a comprehensive Immigrant Employment Strategy. First, we should establish a centralised foreign credentials assessment service that employers could access easily and cheaply when assessing the qualifications of an immigrant applicant.

Second, the federal and provincial governments should establish internship programs in which government organizations hire skilled immigrants for 6 to 12 month internships. Apart from providing immigrants with additional knowledge and skills, the program would pair immigrant workers with mentors who would aid with integration into the Canadian work force.

And third, a federally-funded wage-subsidy program in which government pays a portion of a skilled immigrant worker's salary for up to a year would encourage private sector employers to hire immigrants. Whether hired as a government intern or subsidised employee, these two programs would give immigrants that highly valued Canadian experience that often is the barrier between being hired or not.

Equity and fairness should be enough to stimulate action, but there is an even more compelling reason to act: that $1.6 billion.

Jeffrey Reitz, professor of sociology and director of ethnic immigration and pluralism studies at the University of Toronto, has written that our failure to facilitate full immigrant employment results in a loss to Canada of $1.6 billion each year. But the right government incentives can help prevent this loss to Canada, and allow all immigrants to make the kind of economic contribution my family has been able to make.

In 1995, Premier Jacques Parizeau blamed the loss of Quebec's independence referendum on "money and the ethnic vote." I am proud that my parents were some of the immigrants who voted "no" and helped keep Canada together. Immigrants were critical in keeping the country strong in 1995, and continue to be critical to Canada's development and prosperity. We need to do more to ensure that the economic potential immigrants bring to our country is not wasted.

Sana Halwani

Sana Halwani immigrated to Canada from Lebanon at the age of eight, and knows how much of a privilege it is to be Canadian and have the opportunity to pursue her many passions. Sana is a law graduate from the University of Toronto where she was awarded the Dean's Key for her participation in extracurricular activities in the law faculty. Prior to entering law school, Sana received a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in biochemistry from Queen's University and attended the University of Sheffield as a Chevening Scholar and Celanese Fellow, earning a Master's degree in Biotechnological Law and Ethics. Her thesis explored how the newly enacted Human Rights Act in the UK could be used to improve access to reproductive technologies for infertile couples. Sana has published a number of articles in the health law field, including a chapter on potential government liability for harm to clinical research subjects and a report for the Ontario Human Rights Commission on racial inequality in access to health care services. She is currently a litigator with Gilbert's LLP in Toronto.

When it comes to energy, Canadians are irresponsible consumers. We rarely think twice about the source of the energy we use, whether it's the electricity in our homes, the fuel in our vehicles or the energy that powers our factories.

Of course, this isn't the case for some other products we buy. Many Canadians, for example, consciously choose to purchase certified Fair Trade coffee and cotton that cost a little more. We feel good about those choices, believing they improve the working conditions of laborers and encourage sustainable production that benefits local ecosystems and promotes biodiversity.

Surprisingly, we don't place the same moral weight on oil extraction and energy consumption right here in our own country. We are more critical of farmers in faraway lands than we are about our own unhealthy appetite for dirty energy that pollutes our earth, water and air.

Without question, responsible consumer choices can be a force for good. By "voting with their dollars," concerned citizens have created stronger and more sustainable industries for the benefit of current and future generations. Wouldn't now be a good time to use similar responsible consumption to encourage a cleaner energy industry?

Today, Canada's greenhouse emissions continue to rise and government continues to postpone placing hard limits on this pollution. We used to be known as the country of clean lakes and lush forests; today, our country is seen as the land of tar sands and melting ice caps.

This situation could be turned around, though. There are hundreds of entrepreneurs around the country developing new "clean" technologies that reduce greenhouse emissions and increase energy efficiency. If these entrepreneurs are successful, Canada could become a global leader when it comes to energy solutions that protect the planet.

These Made-In-Canada technologies are doomed to failure if we don't create new clean energy markets in our own country. Canadians must demand clean energy and encourage our governments at all levels to do the same. We need to show we're willing to pay a price to reduce the environmental damage caused by our energy use.

Yes, clean energy will cost more. But it will also create a new, sustainable industry for Canada. The result: A welcome blend of economic growth and improved environmental conditions.

We are more critical of farmers in faraway lands than we are about our own unhealthy appetite for dirty energy that pollutes our earth, water and air.

Each of us has a massive burden to bear in the battle against greenhouse gases: 19 metric tons per year, the average Canadian's volume of energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. No individual can single-handedly make decisions that eliminate this collective pollution but we can use our personal consumption choices and our political clout to generate collective demand for cleaner energy.

For example, Ontario residents can switch their electricity accounts to Bullfrog Power. This entrepreneurial Toronto firm supplies power to the grid using only renewable sources and shifts consumer demand away from hydrocarbon and nuclear sources of electricity.

In places where clean energy is not yet available, consumers can favor sources with the lowest impacts. For example, Canadian-sourced natural gas is preferable to American coal or imported oil that must be transported from abroad and refined.

On the political front, citizens can push the government to impose limits and penalties on emissions while encouraging higher efficiency standards. Government must live up to its role of policing the markets so that environmental destruction is considered a cost rather than profit-maximization strategy.

We can also pressure government to use its massive purchasing power to "buy green" and create demand for renewable energy and new technologies. Consider the case of SunArc of Canada, a Laval, Quebec firm with a greenhouse roof system that uses bubbles to provide insulation and dramatically reduce energy use. If this system was placed in Agriculture Canada's greenhouses, it could create a new market for SunArc and send a positive message to the world about this exportable Canadian technology.

Today, the planet is urgently looking for leadership when it comes to meeting energy needs while protecting the environment. The countries that will provide the solutions to this major challenge will be the leaders of tomorrow's global economy.

Canada has the opportunity to be among these leaders, but only if we encourage homegrown solutions. The success of a clean energy economy in Canada ultimately depends on our willingness as responsible citizens and consumers to make the switch

Bart Kasowski

Bart Kasowski is a Ph.D. student in the department of philosophy at the Université de Montréal and also works with the real estate firm Aeroterm on new business development and public-private partnership projects. He plans to pursue a career as a professor of business ethics and to focus on the role of individual conscience in corporate governance and decision-making. He has worked for Reebok International and Adidas-Salomon, where he was Product Manager for the North American launch of Salomon In-Line Skates. He received his M.B.A. in 2005 from HEC Montréal where he served as president of the M.B.A. Student Association. He obtained his B.A. from Harvard University in 1993 where he was an editor of the student-run daily newspaper. He lives in Outremont, Québec with his wife Francine and their young son Maximilien.

John Crowley graduated from Harvard Business School in 1997. Within a year, his daughter Megan was diagnosed with Pompe disease, a rare fatal muscle disorder with no treatment.

Crowley quit his job and formed a start-up company to focus on finding a cure. He raised hundreds of millions of research dollars, and pushed the scientific community to find new treatments. His story is captured in a book by Geeta Anand, who describes the Crowley family's journey as "truly an American story."

His story is remarkable in part because of the risks he took, but also in how the healthcare system accommodated those risks. He faced considerable challenges in both research and commercialization phases. His company's success highlights the fact that some of the most exciting experiments in healthcare today are led not by policymakers or academics, but by a churning mix of scientific entrepreneurs, venture capital, and start-up companies.

Inspired, I began wondering whether financing state-of-the-art science, advocating for new cures, and accelerating clinical trials is intrinsically American. What would a Canadian version of Crowley's story look like? It is revealing that among the dozens of recommendations in the 2002 Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, most focused on the status quo and none addressed health research and commercialization.

There is a dramatic lack of healthcare risk taking and experimentation within Canada today. Our current national policy "innovation" is one that will inform people how long they have to wait for care, hardly a novel approach to healthcare.

Contrast Canada's empty healthcare innovations laboratory with the experiments being performed elsewhere.

Intel, Walmart, BP America, Applied Materials, and Pitney Bowes are funding an independent nonprofit institute to develop web-based personal health records (PHR) for their employees to be informed about their own care. Walmart sells hundreds of generic medications at the flat rate of $4 for a one-month supply. Galvanon has self-serve kiosks at clinics for patients to confirm their health information and provide feedback on their care experiences.

RediClinic has established walk-in retail clinics with a printed menu of treatments and pricing information for immediate care of non-emergent problems. HealthGrades offer performance data on healthcare providers. DailyStrength.org has established social networks for patients to connect and share their experiences.

Canada needs to maximize the supply of new health ideas brought forward by health entrepreneurs, and increase and diversify the demand for these new technologies.

Many of these experiments in healthcare innovation will fail. But some will succeed, and as a result will lower the cost of care while improving quality.

The hidden cost of Canada's Town Hall Meeting to Royal Commission policy cycle is apparent as we grow our health innovation deficit. We loudly criticize other delivery systems of health while we quietly import billions of dollars in electronic medical records, biopharmaceuticals, and medical devices to our hospitals. Our beloved health model is costing jobs too: Canada does not have a single firm listed on the Forbes ranking of the world's largest biotech companies.

Without a health system that permits risk taking, there will be fewer Canadian health care innovations, fewer Canadian research dollars, and ultimately fewer made-in-Canada cures.

Canada needs to maximize the supply of new health ideas brought forward by health entrepreneurs, and increase and diversify the demand for these new technologies.

On the demand side, innovative start-up companies have a single customer, the Canadian government, one of the most risk-averse in the world. Health Canada has one of the world's slowest new drug approval times. Drug approval in Canada must be faster. Hospitals should have incentives to procure goods from small and medium enterprises.

On the supply side, the creation of a coherent technology transfer policy between universities, hospitals, and research institutes is needed to grow the number of potential ideas being developed. Tax policy that encourages venture and angel investing should be a priority. A long-term commitment to fund and develop the human capital within our academic technology transfer offices is critical.

But these ideas are not new. Formal recommendations to create an environment for health commercialization activities in Canada have been put forward. The Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity recently published a review of the Toronto's Biocluster challenges. The National Angel Organization described the infrastructure required to enhance venture financing. Most recently, in 2006 the Expert Panel on Commercialization submitted their findings to Industry Canada.

John Crowley's drive to improve his children's health is showing early success as his company's medications recently entered clinical trials.

It is important that there is an environment for a Canadian version of his story. It is time policymakers open up the laboratory and let the experiments in healthcare delivery begin.

David Kelton
Physician David Kelton is dedicated to improving health with new technologies that have a patient-centered philosophy. He started ClinLink.com, a website that enables patients to participate in medical research. He is currently specializing in radiology, with an interest in open source software innovation, at the University of Toronto. As the former vice-president of the Toronto Medical Society, he focused on research and advocacy for under-represented minorities in medical education. Prior to medical school, David studied life sciences at Queen's University. Drawing on his diverse health research experience, he has led projects in basic science at McMaster University and in clinical research at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute at Harvard. David believes that successful entrepreneurship is directly linked to strong mentorship experiences. He regards Action Canada as a tremendous opportunity to connect with diverse mentors from across Canada.

Published 10 April 2007 in the Toronto Star.

Canada isn't friendly…any more.

Last week a report released by the Economist Intelligence Unit, affiliated with the Economist Magazine, warned that Canada's standing as one of the most business- friendly countries in the world is at risk.

Delivered at an Ottawa conference, the report takes Canada to task over anemic productivity growth, foreign investment restrictions and barriers to trade.

Among the insights and recommendations in the report, a number of observations critical of the internal trade barriers between provinces and Canada's lack of an internal, national marketplace suggest that Canada is economically immature and politically ineffective.

Our ineffectiveness stems from the fact that Canada's still struggles with free trade and globalization. While we joined NAFTA and reduced some international barriers to trade, we have done little domestically to create an internal, national marketplace.

Since Confederation, Canadians have been hampered by an inter-provincial distrust of the power of free markets to produce economic and social benefits. As a result, Federalism has evolved into an inefficient system of provincial and municipal enclaves of economic autonomy.

Provincial economic independence has created an inter-provincial trading system that hampers productivity through barriers that curb the flow of goods and services. These have impeded Canada's evolution from a middle to a modern power.

Canada cannot hope to compete globally when we have the kind of barriers to internal trade we have now. Bees from Alberta are not allowed to fertilize B.C crops, coloured margarine is not welcome in Quebec and world-renowned Canadian wine is not distributed to liquor stores across Canada. These barriers have artificially sheltered our provinces' economies, with the result that businesses are not properly encouraged to expand domestically and internationally.

Barriers to internal trade often keep Canadian companies at a size that makes them highly vulnerable to international acquisition. Maintaining such barriers creates the "branch plant economy" many fear is hollowing out Canadian enterprise.

Barriers to internal trade often keep Canadian companies at a size that makes them highly vulnerable to international acquisition. Maintaining such barriers creates the "branch plant economy" many fear is hollowing out Canadian enterprise.

However, there is reason to believe that "the times they are a-changing." The Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT), struck in 1994 by the Federal Government has done little to date, but the Council of the Federation, created by the provincial Premiers in 2003 to "promote inter-provincial-territorial cooperation and closer ties between members of the Council," has as its first priority to harmonize trade barriers in the spirit of the AIT.

B.C and Alberta are leading the charge with the British Columbia- Alberta Trade, Investment, and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA), which comes into effect April 1st.

The agreement applies to all sectors of the economies of both provinces and harmonizes legislation, regulations, standards, policies, procedures and guidelines that affect trade, investment and labour mobility.

TILMA moves the west into a position of economic integration that will add $4.8 billion to the B.C economy alone, according to a conference board of Canada study, and sets an example for the rest of the country.

Some suggest that if the Council of the Federation cannot get similar national agreements in place, then our federal government should use its powers under the commerce provisions of the Constitution to create a single Canadian market.

This appears to be an attractive and easy solution, but the federal government doesn't seem to have the power or the political will to act. Therefore, it must come from the provinces, and the Council of the Federation is our best hope to forge these essential agreements.

The other eight Provinces need to follow the lead of B.C and Alberta and reduce inter-provincial trade barriers to increase markets that can accommodate the resulting increase in economic production.

Creating a single Canadian market is good business and good politics. We can continue to have barriers that perpetuate regional divisions and fragment the nation into a series of city-states and regional solitudes, or we can integrate as a whole and create a more productive Canada with free movement of goods, capital and people.

After all, Canada is friendly.

Jake McEwan

Born in Trail, B.C., Jake was raised in the B.C. Kootenays. In 2003 he graduated from the University of Victoria with a B.A. in political science and Greek and Roman studies. Jake then accepted a variety of successive B.C. government jobs including junior communications assistant, research officer for the Northern caucus, executive assistant to the Minister of State for Resort Development, and ministerial assistant to that Minister. During the 2005 B.C. provincial election Jake managed the West Kootenay-Boundary B.C. Liberal campaign, then became the chief political assistant to the Minister of Agriculture and Lands. Having worked as the ministerial assistant (chief of staff) to several ministers responsible for resort and land development, Jake has a wealth of experience in managing the political and public dimensions that surround land planning and development. He was the political staff lead responsible for the B.C. Resort Strategy, the Sea to Sky, North Coast and Central Coast Land and Resource Management Plans, and the Master Development Agreements for Revelstoke and Red Mountain resorts as well as three major golf resorts. He is currently Development Manager with Concord Pacific Group Inc. In his spare time Jake is an avid golfer, skier, surfer and general outdoor enthusiast. With a passion for music, Jake has spent many hours behind a drum kit recording and touring with three different bands. His music has been featured on Canadian rock radio stations.

My trips to visit the local bank manager as a young entrepreneur always ended with the words "Sounds like a great idea. Come back and see us when you get a sale." Canada's entrepreneurial growth is being stunted by major banks. There is little appetite to back start-up companies. This caution suggests that banks have forgotten what innovation is all about. Instead, friends and family are left to take all the risks and reap the rewards.

I have been involved with a family business for the past several years. My brother has invented and developed a high-tech, wireless parking meter. We have built the company that develops it from scratch and we currently employ over 40 people. It has been difficult at every stage for us to access seed capital. Perhaps it's watching my brother sell his house, car and cashing in every investment he's ever had in struggling to make pay roll. Perhaps it's watching my Mom trying to balance the books, or perhaps it's having to constantly ask friends and family for money, but this issue is personal for me.

According to a recent study by the Department of Finance, "In general, the smaller the firm, the higher the incidence of a loan application being rejected. For example, the loan rejection rate ranged from 23.3 percent for the smallest businesses to 3 percent for larger Businesses."

In contrast, the US Small Business Administration reports that the number of small business loans increased by 22.6 percent between June 2004 and June 2005 in the United States. The increase was concentrated in the smallest loans, the number of which rose from 15.2 million to 19 million in June 2005, constituting an increase of 25 percent as compared with a decrease of 11 percent from the previous year.

This trend in Canada is particularly alarming when manufacturing a product like ours given its high production cost. Fortunately, in our case, despite the lack of support from traditional lenders, we are making a go of it. We have just received our first big order that was a prerequisite to bank loans. Ironically, once the sales are in place, we won't need the banks. We needed them two years ago. My family and friends are to thank for the company's success. When banks shied away from the prospect of investing in a company with limitless potential, but no revenues, my friends and family have come through.

Statistics show that most start-up companies in Canada will not survive the first year of existence. This is primarily due to lack of available capital in Canada.

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This problem is further exacerbated by what many economists call the "equity gap." A recent article from The Economist defines this problem faced by many of today's entrepreneurs as "a scarcity of ready sources of outside financing for the smallest companies." When facing this gap, the entrepreneur is left with few options. The entrepreneur can seek the capital it desperately needs from an established venture capital firm (VC), or they can turn to an angel investor, who are typically wealthy individuals seeking high-risk investments.

If the entrepreneur is forced to rely on funding from venture capital firms, he will have to risk his company. This is because typically, venture capitalists, or as they are known by many entrepreneurs "vulture capitalists," are organized investment firms who will demand a very large stake of your business for a nominal amount of money. Venture capital firms play the odds. The investors invest in a number of companies, take a median loss on the investments, but rely on a single hit to yield an incredible return. They pick a group of companies, invest as little as possible in exchange for a controlling interest. The VC then insists on creating difficult to achieve "incentives" or "milestones" that the company must reach before it can be eligible to receive more funds. Their investment strategy is to provide very limited financing, while expecting miracles. Inevitably, the business will require more money as its spending increases, and the entrepreneur will be forced to go back to the VC, and dilute themselves even further.

There is one other alternative for the cash strapped entrepreneur. Another way to bridge the equity gap is through wealthy private investors known as "angel investors." Angels are typically less risk averse than institutional lenders such as chartered banks and venture capital firms. Since they are less structured than VCs and their processes less formalized, they can be a more palatable source of funding for entrepreneurs.

However, entrepreneurs beware, critics warn that some weaknesses have already started to surface with the angel model. There is a new, emerging "secondary equity gap," in which loose networks of angel investors are beginning to form in order to standardize investment terms and practices. The danger is that angel syndicates may start to behave more like venture-capital firms by organizing in a similar way. Thus, the advantage of dealing with a less structured and more flexible angel investor is negated

One is left to wonder whether this "equity gap" need even exist if major banks were more proactive in supporting start-up companies. Government should work with the chartered banks to create incentives for Canadians to invest in small businesses. This could be achieved through tax initiatives such as allowing private investors to deduct their investments or establishing high risk-high return investment pools.

Perhaps Canadian banks could adopt the American approach where many banks establish "small business credit cards," which assist in providing a revolving line of credit for small business.

Without such policies, entrepreneurs in Canada will be left with the choice of either reaching out to venture capital firms, or angel investors, risking losing control of their company, or getting out of the entrepreneur business altogether. Unfortunately, when friends and family are involved, the entrepreneur is really left with no choice at all.
If not for the financial support of my friends and family, our business would have been a "no parking zone."

Jason Mitschele
Committed to equality and social justice for all Canadians, Jason Mitschele practices law as a federal prosecutor for the department of Justice in Toronto. Jason is also a proud advocate for the promotion of equality for persons with disabilities. He is currently serving his second term on the board of directors of the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS). He is also a member of the International Development Committee of the Counsel of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD), where he advises the organization and the Canadian government on international law in policy. Jason has most recently been part of the CCD's advisory group on the negotiation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities currently being discussed at the United Nations in New York. Jason is a graduate of the faculty of law at the University of Toronto where he focused on international law and development. Prior to attending law school, Jason completed an internship with Disabled Peoples South Africa where he gained valuable experience working with local and national organizations in shaping human rights law and policy in the new South Africa. He plans to share his perspectives on equality as an Action Canada Fellow. According to Jason, "The time is now to make significant improvements in the lives of Canadians with disabilities."

In Canada our aspiration for a multicultural society has become confused with the myth that we live in such a place. We don't.

I work as an entrepreneur, and have started a couple of for-profits and a charity that last year raised close to $20 million for over 3,000 charities across the country. I have contributed to Canada.

But, I have had to compensate for my colour to do so. I have seen that having a white colleague with me in some places opens doors, and makes a difference to my business success. In some places my colour closes doors.

My brother and I were recently shocked when a saleswoman told us we couldn't seek shelter in her store from rain. We had followed a pair of white kids into the store, and the salesperson let them stay but asked us to leave. As we started to walk out the door we heard her mutter '…don't want your kind in here.'

It's not just my experience. A recent University of Toronto study found that over a third of Chinese immigrants, and close to half of black immigrants had experienced discrimination. More generally a recent *Globe and Mail* article points out that our cities are self-segregating into 'mono-cultural' neighbourhoods. Not a surprise for anyone who has driven through the suburbs of Toronto or Vancouver anytime in the last 10 years. Trudeau's multicultural experiment is not working.

Against the backdrop of overt or covert discrimination, the draw of 'home' becomes stronger. I recently traveled in India, and it finally hit me how much I had been sacrificing as I compensated for my colour.

It's a place filled with tremendous opportunity, quite different than what it was 10 years ago. Each year tens of thousands were returning from the States, and today the majority of professional graduates choose to stay.

It's a question of belonging, a question Canadians need to ask themselves. What does our adoptive country really think of us?

Much dialogue about immigrants focuses on the impending labour shortage Canada is facing. We are already beginning to see the impact of Canada's changing demographics. In British Columbia, for example, over 600,000 people will retire in the next 20 years, while barely 100,000 enter the workforce.

The shortfall will have to be made up in part by adjusted retirement ages and technology, but mostly by immigrants. We don't make best use of those who have come here. Who hasn't had a taxi driver with a Ph.D. in Toronto?

We know we need to focus on integrating immigrants into our labour force, but racism is a real barrier. We need to ensure that if they come, they choose to stay.

We know we need to focus on integrating immigrants into our labour force, but racism is a real barrier. We need to ensure that if they come, they choose to stay.

Canada needs to ask if and how it can create a sense of belonging for immigrants. We need to understand that extended families, even if they aren't 'high economic value' immigrants, need to be welcomed because they create a sense of home. That there need to be programs that encourage empathy and understanding across ethnic lines.

We mostly need to recognize that our multicultural experiment is not working, and racism is a real Canadian problem. Maybe then we can begin to collectively work to build a truly inclusive society, one in which those of colour like me would feel welcome in a country that tells us we are needed.

I have been in Canada for 13 years and have not applied for Canadian citizenship. I want to be a citizen of this country. But I want to know that this is an accepting country. One in which I am not continually having to fight an uphill battle, facing an enemy that I'm told doesn't exist.

Aaron Pereira

Strongly dedicated to social activism, Aaron Pereira has most recently been working to develop a new financial institution focused on financing Canadian social sector organizations. He is a co-founder of CanadaHelps, an online organization that engages Canadians to donate their time and money to causes across the country. Aaron's commitment to social activism reaches back to high school when he was involved with a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) project to raise money for displaced Kurds following the first Gulf War. Aaron completed a Bachelor's degree in economics from Queen's University in 2002. Past committee memberships include the Ethics Committee of the Washington-based e-Philanthropy Foundation; the Federal Government's National Roundtable on the Social Economy; and the Strategy Committee of Queen's University. In recognition of his work, he was named an Ashoka Fellow in 2004, joining a global fellowship of outstanding social entrepreneurs.

In its last budget, the federal government allocated some $2 billion for research and development, primarily destined for Canada's universities. Are the recipients making good use of this money? Universities excel at making discoveries, but they are ineffective at turning them into bonuses for the economy.

In and of itself, an invention does not create wealth. It only has an economic impact if it leads to the development of a product, a process or an idea that can be sold and commercialized. Given the enormous potential of university discoveries, there can be no doubt that they could be turned into economic generators, provided the link between research and the economy is managed effectively. The responsibility for doing so rests with each university's Technology Transfer Office (TTO).

TTOs, in charge of administering connections between university research and industry, and commercializing the intellectual property of universities, are not having the expected impact. A significant change in culture is required to improve relations between university researchers and venture capitalists.

Though at present there is no consensus as to how to measure TTO performance, it is clear that, greater flexibility in the way they manage in order to become more sensitive to the needs of both researchers and venture capitalists, would facilitate the commercialization of intellectual property and lead to greater economic spinoffs for Canada.

The link between TTOs and researchers is complex. Turning an invention to profit can be achieved by creating a new spinoff company or by licensing its use to others. But often TTOs are too slow about patenting researchers' discoveries, or simply fail to recognize their industrial potential. TTOs are also criticized for lacking qualified staff, which prevents them from responding adequately to researchers' needs.

Researchers generally hope their research will have a positive impact on the community. Yet it is not always beneficial for them to reveal their discoveries, since often the university lays claim to any invention developed internally. Internal inventions are defined as those achieved using the supplies, equipment and facilities of the university, and with its technical, administrative and financial aid.

Of course, not all universities have the same policies on the sharing of profits from commercialization. For example, the Université de Montréal guarantees researchers a minimum of 15% of any income generated by their discoveries. In contrast, the University of Waterloo has created an environment that is much more favourable to academic entrepreneurship. Researchers there have a choice between commercializing their discoveries themselves or calling on the services of their TTO, in which case profits are shared with the university.

If Canada's universities hope to participate in this new knowledge economy, they must change the way they run their TTOs.

Poor relations between TTOs and venture capitalists also tend to inhibit the commercialization of university inventions. Insensitive to the needs of researchers, TTOs aren't always tuned in to what the industry is looking for. The fact that TTOs are primarily oriented toward generating additional revenue for their universities is prejudicial to the commercialization of intellectual property. When venture capitalists investors see no possibility of making a reasonable profit from their investment, they may decide to back out of negotiations for a sales or partnership contract.

Furthermore, there are complaints from the private sector that TTOs care little about the demands of the marketplace and often delay the signing of contracts. In a world where technology is advancing at a dizzying pace, the speed with which venture capitalists investors can settle on the terms of commercializing a product is a crucial matter. Any improvement in the performance of TTOs can only come by paying greater attention to the needs of their clients, both university researchers and venture capitalists.

The primary mission of universities is to provide quality education in an environment favourable to free intellectual activity. At a time when funding for post-secondary education is precarious, it is understandable that universities are concerned about finding sources of income. But they should also think of contributing to the economy.

With the manufacturing sector relocating to emerging economies like China, India and Brazil, Canada must find other avenues through which to become more competitive. It must switch its focus to the commercialization of advanced technologies. And if Canada's universities hope to participate in this new knowledge economy, they must change the way they run their TTOs.

This article was originally written in French.

Emmanuelle Richez
Emmanuelle Richez is of Franco-Vietnamese heritage and grew up in Gatineau, Québec. She is currently a doctoral student in political science at McGill University, where she is specializing in the impact of Supreme Court judgements on Canadian citizenship. Previously she obtained an M.A. in political science from Université Laval, and a B.A. in political science from the University of Ottawa, where she graduated magna cum laude. While studying in Québec City, Emmanuelle worked as an aide to Québec's minister of intergovernmental affairs and democratic reform. She has also worked in Ottawa as a page at the House of Commons and as a legislative assistant to the MP for the riding of Portneuf. She also worked at Magna International Inc. after being a finalist in Magna's As Prime Minister Awards essay contest. In her spare time, Emmanuelle likes to cook, rollerblade, and shop for bargains on eBay.

The thin or thick envelope, that's how you predicted whether you were accepted or not. Today, you're more likely to be notified by a vibrating blackberry with the fateful message: accepted or declined.

Yet few Canadian women will be receiving any notification at all since they never applied to Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programs. The persistent under-representation of female MBA students at Canada's top business schools is stunning.

Women constitute 30 percent or less of the student body in 48 of the 100 business schools listed in the Financial Times 2007 Global MBA Rankings. Of the five Canadian schools that made the coveted list, female enrolment was only 30 to 35 percent.

Business is one of the few disciplines that continues to experience low levels of female enrolment despite a post-secondary environment that is seeing the strongest female representation in history.

Today, women often make up more than half the class in other masters programs such as law and medicine. This year, 60 percent of first-year medical students at the University of British Columbia and over 75 percent at the University of Montreal are female.

This is not the case at Canada's top MBA schools; not even close.

The under-representation of women in business schools is discouraging given decades of effort to promote women in business and ultimately hurts the bottom line of Canadian corporations.

According to research conducted in 2004 by Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that conducts research on women's career advancement, Fortune 500 companies with the highest percentages of women corporate officers yielded a 35 percent higher average return on equity and 34 percent higher total return to shareholders than those with the lowest percentages of women corporate officers.

Some argue that it is the nature of business itself that explains the disproportionate number of female MBA applicants. As Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School, explains, "I have come to believe that the problem lies more with business than with business schools. Lots of women look at the world of business and see it as unfriendly to their life cycle – in particular as inflexible to them in their child rearing years. So they don't make it a priority to get graduate education in that field."

Young business women value their careers and their families and want to excel in both. In order to thrive, we require flexibility and customization in all areas of our lives.

The corporate sector undoubtedly has work to do to make careers in business more attractive to women but what can business schools do? Can Canada's leaders in business education create MBA programs that better suit the needs of women?

Innovation in MBA program delivery has resulted in positive recruitment trends. Last year, when the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario reduced their full-time two year MBA program to one year, female enrolment jumped ten percent to 35 percent. Queen's University's Accelerated MBA Program that allows undergraduate business graduates to complete their MBA in just one year while continuing to work has a female enrolment of 45 percent. These programs offer more flexibility and require less time, both attractive features to female students.

While both men and women face significant financial tradeoffs in deciding to pursue a MBA, the unique difference for women is that they must also contend with considerations of lifecycle planning. Students tend to enter other professional schools such as medicine and law at younger ages or shortly after undergraduate graduation, but MBA programs generally attract students who have been in the workforce for some time. For women in their mid to late twenties, the average age of MBA students, pursuing a traditional MBA typically means significantly delaying beginning a family in order to see a return on their investment.

A substantial commitment is required to excel in an MBA program and then to benefit from the opportunities by establishing oneself in a new job after graduation. The typical MBA program structure provides little flexibility for women at a critical decision-making period of their lives.

It is this lack of flexibility that most deters women from business schools, and business careers.

Much discussion is taking place in corporate circles about the critical need to attract and retain women. Competition for talent is fierce in today's demographic environment in which the workforce is aging and birth rates have been below replacement levels for some time. Human resource and executive teams are examining the nature of the work they offer to employees. Many organizations are looking to work-life quality initiatives and alternative work arrangements as ways of distinguishing themselves from their competitors. These initiatives are poised to make workplaces increasingly female and family friendly in the coming years.

But what about business schools? Creativity and customization is program structure would result in more female and family friendly MBA programs.

Imagine a program that would allow students to design their own course loads – students could opt to take time off for parental leave or could alternate between full and part-time study as desired. Similarly, flexible recruiting opportunities that allow students the option of participating in a school's recruiting program in any year of their choosing following graduation would allow graduates to take time off following their studies and then return to benefit from the school's career counseling and recruiting programs when they are ready to reenter the workforce.

Young business women value their careers and their families and want to excel in both. In order to thrive, we require flexibility and customization in all areas of our lives.

Right now, the decision to attend business school requires that women choose school and career over family. That stark decision is unnecessary. Business schools should lead the way and offer better options for students with both career and family aspirations through creative program delivery that would serve the needs of tomorrow's female business leaders, and ultimately of Canadian business.

Alexis Wise

Alexis has always demonstrated an interest in the intersection of social and economic policies and outcomes. In her three years as a consultant at Monitor Group, an international management consulting firm, Alexis provided strategic counsel to both private and public sector clients across a wide variety of industries including media and publishing, pharmaceuticals, life sciences, transportation, and healthcare. In 2004, she made a career shift to pursue her passion for entrepreneurship. Alexis works as an independent consultant, primarily in the healthcare field, and is co-founder of LifeSpeak Inc., a national company providing work-life integration solutions to leading Canadian organizations. LifeSpeak currently operates in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto and Montreal, employs 15 staff and touches over 22,000 employees. Raised in Toronto, Alexis is a graduate (with distinction) of the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario. When she is not involved in business development, Alexis dedicates her time to her friends and her community through a variety of volunteer, athletic and continuing education interests. Alexis is an active and long-time volunteer with Camp Oochigeas (an overnight camp for children with cancer), the Hospital For Sick Children and Junior Achievement. She is an avid downhill skier and ultimate frisbee player and continues to pursue her studies in French language.

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Tightening the rules on lobbying is a popular idea these days. As laws proliferate and become tighter, there is a need for careful reflection about the effects of such regulations. What are the consequences of stricter controls on lobbying? By tightening the rules, will we really achieve the objectives intended? The time is right to think about these issues, the more so because in Quebec, five years after its adoption, the Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Act is coming up for review. This is a good opportunity to suggest certain modifications.

Pernicious effects

In a democratic society, lobbying is a legitimate activity. Elected representatives and public servants cannot govern in a vacuum: it is a good thing for the stakeholders of civil society to be able to put forward their points of view, for it helps ensure that government reflects the collective will. For all their good intentions, the decisions of legislators sometimes result in regulations that, in fact, can discourage businesses and interest groups from expressing their needs to government. While no one would suggest that the most powerful lobbies— such as the oil, aerospace and pharmaceutical industries—are intimidated by strict rules, there is no such certainty in the case of interest groups with more limited resources, not to mention small businesses, which, let us not forget, represent 97% of all Canadian companies.

In a study I conducted one year after the passage of the Quebec law, it was clear that the red tape involved in registering lobbyists could have two pernicious effects. On the one hand, there is a strong likelihood of the smallest players going underground to have an influence, for they lack the resources to get on the Registry of Lobbyists and to provide the required updates. On the other hand, it can be expected that the complexity of the rules will cause many groups and SMEs to limit their representations to government, with the risk of facing inadequate legislation concerning their activities.

The tightening of the rules prescribed in the federal Accountability Act could exacerbate these pernicious effects in two ways. First, by adding to the burden of being on the Registry with the requirement of monthly updates (in the old law, it was every six months). Second, by forbidding results-based remuneration, as does the Quebec law. This type of remuneration may at times be controversial, yet for some groups and businesses it is the only way they can afford to obtain the services of a professional lobbyist. This is the case with numerous organizations that lack the resources to hire a lawyer. After studying the Quebec draft bill in 2002, the Quebec Ombudsman stated that forbidding results-based remuneration would, for many, "reduce access to the holders of public office and lead to a distortion of the democratic process."

We can only hope that the review of the Quebec law takes place in an atmosphere of calm, well removed from the political action.

By imposing a five-year "purgatory" on public office holders (POHs) who wish to return as lobbyists, the federal law contributes to maintaining a climate of suspicion around lobbying, while also discouraging the recruitment of public figures who might otherwise be interested in making the jump into politics. Let us remember that a similar provision of the Quebec law—imposing a one- or two-year wait depending on the position the POH had occupied—drew protests across parties from members of the political staff who saw in it a flagrant lack of confidence in their integrity.

"Washes whiter than white"

Legislation aimed at controlling lobbying is usually passed—or modified—in response to political crises. This was the case in the United States, in Quebec, and at the federal level in Canada, where the Accountability Act reflected a number of the recommendations of Justice John Gomery in the wake of the sponsorship scandal. That sort of climate often leads to legislative decisions whose purpose is more to improve the image of political parties than to set effective guidelines for lobbying.

Quebec's exception for non-profit organizations, which are not subject to the Act, bears eloquent witness to how a political crisis can result in legislative shortcuts. Since the events giving rise to the Quebec law had involved consultant lobbyists, the latter were penalized by a double standard, subjecting them to rules that are inordinately severe compared to the constraints imposed on other categories of lobbyists. In the saga of the attempt to relocate the Montreal Casino, for example, the project's promoters had to report to the Registry of Lobbyists as to which POHs were targeted by their lobbying, the nature of that lobbying, the period in which it was conducted, and its goals, while most of the groups opposed to the project were free to exert pressure on authorities without having to report such matters.

Confidence begins with recognition

We can only hope that the review of the Quebec law takes place in an atmosphere of calm, well removed from the political action. It is crucial that the nuts and bolts of a number of legislative elements be carefully reconsidered. While overzealousness should be avoided, it seems inescapable that non-profit organizations be made formally subject to the law, putting an end to the double standard that has perpetuated suspicions about certain types of lobbies. Another proposed measure that warrants exploration is the obligation to record in the Registry lobbying strategies like the formation of citizen coalitions. At the same time, consultation of the Registry should be made easier, so that interested parties—like the media—can better fulfil their "watchdog" role. Last but not least, affording recognition to lobbying is a crucial ingredient in raising citizen confidence in our institutions. It is essential that this activity, whether conducted for businesses or interest groups, be considered legitimate, healthy and desirable in any democratic society.

This article was originally written in French.

Stéphanie Yates

Stéphanie wants to work against the ambient cynicism directed towards Canadian democratic institutions. She holds a B.A. in communication with a public relations specialization from University of Québec in Montréal and a Master's degree in public communication from Laval University. She centered her Master's research on lobbyism in Québec, work which earned her a place among the finalists for the Jean-Charles Bonenfant Award for the best Master's thesis on Québec politics. Stéphanie's professional career is characterized by its diversity. After assuming responsibility for the public relations and marketing portfolio of an environmental multinational business for three years, she decided to jump into the political arena. After successfully completing a one-year internship at the National Assembly of Québec, she worked as a political attachée for the office of the Premier of Québec, and then became press attachée and vice-chief of office for the Minister of e-government, also in Québec. She was actively involved in preparing Connecting Québec to its Citizens, a report used by the Québec government to orient its development efforts around the e-government initiative. As her political career has produced more questions than answers, Stéphanie is now doing her PhD in political science at Laval University. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada is helping her in her studies with their most prestigious scholarship. Having already published some of her work, Stéphanie studies how interest groups use communication and information technologies in a context where e-democracy initiatives have the support of governments and where these efforts can contribute to re-establishing citizens' trust in their democratic institutions.

The Canadian government should give its foreign aid money to wealthy corporations to help the poor in the developing world.

Outrageous? Perhaps not. Many multinationals already have a much stronger local presence than the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). For example, Canadian mining, oil, and gas companies in Africa have assets of about $10 B with project life expectancies of 20-30 years, dwarfing Canada's aid money of around $1 B to run projects of 2-3 year durations.

Some corporations already are active in aid projects. Take Alcan for example, whose HIV/AIDS program at its Cameroon smelter has contributed to a reduction in the prevalence rate among employees and their families from around 14 percent in 1998 to 3 percent today. They have begun working with the Cameroon government to extend the program to neighbouring villages. After all, healthy people make productive employees.

Unfortunately such Canadian business-involved projects are rare, but there are ample examples from outside of Canada. Philips is known for its big-screen televisions, but they also are piloting mobile medical vans in India that use innovative technologies to reduce the cost of treatment. Their objective is to reach 15,000 people a year at an average diagnostic cost of US$1.80, far below the current costs for health care delivery in India. The beverage company Unilever Tea Kenya goes far beyond a cup of tea; they own and operate an 85-bed hospital, four health centers, and 22 dispensaries with an annual medical budget of US$1.4 M.

These and other examples focus on health care delivery but projects abound in other vital services. Procter & Gamble provides hundreds of millions of liters of clean drinking water around the developing world at lower costs than traditional methods. TNT, a Dutch logistics company, makes its jets available at cost for transportation of emergency food aid in crisis situations. Lafarge's "Project Employability" educates young Indians in technical trades, in collaboration with the Institute of Engineers.

Why are firms active in such unfamiliar territories? These regions represent the future - as employees, consumers, suppliers and even investors. The aid projects also address the "societal license to operate" that is part of a growing movement for multinational corporations to give back to the community in return for the "right" to do business.

Our government can encourage and facilitate greater Canadian corporate participation in effective foreign aid by encouraging companies to do more in their host communities through a financial incentive program.

Can we trust large corporations to act in the interest of the poor with public money? We have all heard horror stories of mining companies in Latin America or oil companies in Africa exploiting local populations and harming environments. No doubt there are bad apples in the bunch, but any government-funded aid projects would need to ensure appropriate checks-and-balances.

One such check is increasing public scrutiny of publicly listed corporations. Other formal mechanisms could include a governance and assessment body with representatives from government, private sector, civil society and developing countries.

None of the programs above would have happened without critical government partnership. Alone, they simply do not make good business sense, but as shared ventures, they create win-win outcomes.

The Canadian government should be a partner of choice for Canadian companies abroad. Our government can encourage and facilitate greater Canadian corporate participation in effective foreign aid by encouraging companies to do more in their host communities through a financial incentive program.

For example, additional funding would encourage a company that has invested in social infrastructure for its own employees and families, such as a school or hospital, to expand these services to the broader community at a marginal cost. A healthier and better-educated population is good business, providing a more productive workforce for a company that plans to be in a region for a few decades or more.

Government-corporate partnerships can be symbiotic, sharing risks and increasing benefits. Corporations risk billions on their foreign operations, and must balance competitiveness with being good local citizens. CIDA has a mandate to improve communities and economies overseas and must be accountable to Canadians, but often lacks the resources.

Large corporations have the management expertise and personnel to get projects up and running efficiently and effectively. CIDA has the credibility and authority to work with local government institutions to build local ownership and capacity.

Multinational corporations are profit-driven, and we should not impose "mandatory" service requirements on Canadian corporations that may render them uncompetitive in the global economy. But we should not shirk from mixing profit and civil service, either. Canadian companies have considerable experience and vested-interests in local societies. Let's insure that they deliver results for the poor in the countries where they invest through innovative programs.

The poor mother receiving critical medical attention for her child is more likely concerned with access then where it is coming from. So why are we?

Rebekah Young
A native of Nova Scotia, Rebekah Young was recently recruited by the federal Recruitment of Policy Leaders Programme in Ottawa, where she currently works with the Department of Finance on international development policy. Prior to that, she worked for over three years with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), a CEO-led organization for multinational companies in Geneva, Switzerland. In a very versatile job environment, she worked on issues such as eco-efficiency, technology, small-and-mid-size enterprises, poverty alleviation, and globalisation in more than 20 countries. She has also worked on clean plant design, eco-efficiency, and industrial ecology with Hatch, an international consulting company in Canada and with a start-up in the USA (Applied Sustainability LLC). She holds an MBA from INSEAD (France/Singapore), a Master's degree in environmental assessment and evaluation from the London School of Economics (UK), and a chemical engineering degree from McGill University. In her spare time, she enjoys hiking, jogging, skiing and triathlon.

Rick's op-ed piece has not been included because of publication restrictions due to employment.

Rick Nielsen

Rick was born and raised in the Yukon Territory and has made his home there ever since. He is passionate about learning and making a difference. His quest has taken him down an eclectic career path as a tradesman, commercial pilot and entrepreneur with businesses in both Yukon and Alaska. He has served as a director and chairman of both the Whitehorse and Yukon Chambers of Commerce and has been active on public policy initiatives. He is a staunch advocate for trades training for young Canadians and is the past chairman of the Yukon Apprenticeship Advisory Board and the Inter-provincial Alliance of Apprenticeship Board Chairs. Rick was a founding member of the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum. He has been active with the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada as a volunteer, principally focusing on improving the participation of Aboriginal Canadians in apprenticeship training. He attended the Banff School of Advanced Management which sparked his interest in public policy and governance. Rick is currently serving as the Chief of Staff to the Premier of Yukon.

Benjamin's op-ed piece has not been included because of publication restrictions due to employment.

Benjamin Shinewald

Benjamin Shinewald's diverse professional experiences reflect his interests in both public policy and private enterprise – and the interplay between the two. Benjamin is presently on an Executive Interchange, serving as a senior analyst in the Economic and Regional Development Secretariat of the Privy Council Office. Prior to this position, Benjamin practiced corporate and securities law for three years at Torys LLP, one of Canada's top " Bay Street" law firms. His earlier employment experiences include serving as a law clerk to Chief Justice Aharon Barak of the Supreme Court of Israel; working at Simpson Thacher and Bartlett, a major "Wall Street" law firm in New York; interning for Hon. Martin Lee, chair of the Democratic Party of Hong Kong; serving in the Permanent Delegation of Canada to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris; and working for the Winnipeg Jets Hockey Club of the National Hockey League. Benjamin earned a Juris Doctor in Law from the University of Toronto, where he also served as the president of the Students' Law Society and was a fellow at Massey College. He earned a Master's degree in international relations from the London School of Economics, where he was a fellow at Goodenough College; and a B.A. (first class honours) from the University of Manitoba, where he also participated in a one-year exchange at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Benjamin has earned approximately 15 scholarships, including a Rotary Foundation Cultural Ambassadorial Scholarship to France. He is fluent in English, French and Hebrew and speaks some Spanish. Benjamin has also been active in the community, volunteering as a Big Brother in Winnipeg. He has held a wide variety of positions on various charitable and community boards, including the United Way, the Asper Foundation and the London Goodenough Association of Canada. He has traveled to approximately 30 countries, spending approximately a quarter of his life abroad. He is also an avid photographer, runner and hockey player.

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