



Op-Ed

Three game-changing ideas for Canada in 2015: Restoring Confidence in Our Future

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Sometimes you have to stand back to see the big picture.

After thirty years in the environmental movement in Canada, I am doing just that. I spent much of the past year researching a major report on Canada's future, and my family and I are currently in Istanbul, four months into a year-long tour of the world.

I'm standing back from the big picture that is Canada, and while I am immensely proud to call Canada my home, the trends are troubling, and our future is in doubt.

There are the obvious global environmental and economic trends: climate change, resource depletion, international debt and fragile economies. Not only are they heading in the wrong direction, but they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. If we fail to address the root issue of unsustainable consumption, we will face a major crisis within a generation. It's that simple.

Canada was once a world leader in humanitarian and ecological causes. Now, we are a nation focused on tax cuts and personal gain. We have become complacent in our success, and our complacency facilitates the abuse of power.

Take the charitable sector, for example. Once, Canadian charities helped shape Canada's leadership on acid rain and apartheid. Over the past few decades, they have been systematically suppressed and muzzled through funding cuts, bureaucratic reporting requirements, legal chill, and now, worst of all, charitable audits by the federal government. This is not a trend to be proud of.

What may be a spark of hope in Canada is readily evident in countries where the economic crisis is far worse. In Greece, crippled by a debt load of over 300 billion euros, the political focus is on international loans to bail out the nation's creditors, with a combination of austerity and taxes to cover the bills. Dive down to the local level and you will see both the negative and positive signs of real economic transformation: the concrete shells of halted development, the growth in rooftop passive solar panels, and the bustling local markets. In Canada, by contrast, urban sprawl continues apace, very little solar heating exists, and we treat farmers' markets as a luxury more than a necessity. We still have a long way to go.

This is why, standing back from the big picture, I can say with certainty that our hope for the future lies more in our culture than in technology or policy. Our culture dictates how well we respond to adversity, but it also creates the demand and opportunity for economic and political leadership.

I have hope for our cultural commitment in Canada. As a nation, we do not tolerate corruption and greed in government. Our sense of fiscal scandal over relatively small expense claims amazes people we have met in Europe, where corruption runs deep. Second, Canada has embraced diversity like no other nation, finding strength in people and supporting each other's aspirations for a better life. As a country, if we build on our strengths, we can ensure that Canada remains a great place to live and an international leader for a better future.

First, we all need to raise our voices; not in anger or disgust, but in articulating a common desire for a better future. We need to speak as a nation. Regardless of our political affiliation, religion, culture, financial status, or priority concerns, we need to unite behind a common desire that our communities, and our Canada, will continue to be a great place to live. We need a national campaign for a better future that will create the space for ideas and solutions to emerge.

Second, if we value Canada as a great place to live and a global leader in building a better world, we must live our values. Our politicians and economy are but a reflection of ourselves. Ride a bike, take a walk, shop local, support local restaurants and culture, insulate your home or install a solar heater, volunteer or donate. Find your own ways to enjoy life without taxing the earth. Live better with less.

Third, our leaders must empower change. This holds true for leaders in government, business or society. The true mark of leadership lies not in the acquisition of power, but in the ability to use it to empower others. Governments alone cannot solve climate change, resource scarcity, or the rising cost of living and economic downturns. It may be a radical idea, but the true purpose of both government and business is to help us live a better life. Repairing the damage done to the work of charities would be a good start. Restore a working partnership.

The choice is ours for 2015. Do we continue down the path of cynicism and negativism in the hopes that we can hold on to what is slipping away, or do we embrace change and seek to respond to the challenges that lie ahead by building a better future?

Chris Winter is the Project Director for Canada Conserves. His report "The Next Wave: Weathering the coming Storm", including two background studies on high level government strategies and communication priorities, is available at www.canadaconserves.ca.

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Photos for media use can be found at: www.canadaconserves.ca/mediaphotos.

For information: Chris Winter, chris@canadaconserves.ca.

To arrange an interview, please contact Michael Zupanic at Environmental Communication Options at mzupanic@ecostrategy.ca or 416-972-7404.