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In an age of upheaval,
Alberta's time to shine

Cambridge Strategies Inc. Policy Briefs

Conversations that matter

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In an age of upheaval, Alberta's time to shine

The discontent in most of the world's large countries invites a remaking of our societies. Nelson Mandela calls for a new political culture based on human rights, and our mutual responsibility for one another's well being. We Albertans can deliver that change, by moving from charity to dignity as the foundation of our province's social policy, writes Satya Brata Das.

There is no apology, no mewling about following orders: Ratko Mladic remains defiantly proud of what he calls his patriotic service, no matter that the International Criminal Court terms it genocide.

In the widely-broadcast proceedings of his trial in The Hague, the onetime commanding general of the Bosnian Serb army turns to face the jeers of his victim's families. Smiles, hand slashing across throat with a gesture that bespeaks a Balkan skill in wielding the knife. His

president and fellow accused, the psychiatrist and mass murderer Radovan Karadzic, is equally unrepentant: each ablaze with an atavistic zeal that remains utterly incomprehensible to those of us who embrace modernity and its pluralism.

The Mladic trial is the ashen debris from the last two decades of the 20th century. Of all the calamitous events that ended humankind's bloodiest century, the genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia remain the most incomprehensible. To this day, I cannot fathom the depths of the blood lust that drove the animus between Rwanda's Tutsis and Hutus; and least of all the 600-year slow simmer of Balkan hatred.

The best antidote, to my mind, is to build a society that is the polar opposite of this bloody tribalism. We Canadians have largely done so. Yet there is much more to be done, in projecting Canadian values and the Canadian brand to the world. We Albertans can play our part, in offering living proof that diversity is an enduring

source of strength, and that power structures can and should evolve to be much more inclusive than they have ever been.

And it is absolutely necessary to do so, if we are to overcome divisions sown centuries ago in bloodshed and hatred. The devolution of the former Yugoslavia from civilization to savagery is a sobering lesson in the fragility of diverse societies, taught anew by the trial of Ratko Mladic.

In my dozen-plus years as an *Edmonton Journal* editorialist, I quickly learned the folly of trying to bring reasoned judgment and analysis to the Balkan cauldron. Rebukes were fast and furious from Canadians with ancestry in the fractured Yugoslavia: each tribe convinced the others were wrong, parroting the vile propaganda that gave rise to slaughter.

Pick any time period as a point of reference, and everyone in the Balkans could claim victimhood. The Bosnian Croat leader Mate Boban, for instance, charmingly observed that whilst Bosnian Serbs were his brothers in Christ, Bosnians of Muslim heritage hadn't done much useful besides "raping our mothers and daughters" for 700 years.

Before my telephone rings with Balkan-accented outrage on the other end of the line, let me be clear that there is plenty of blame on all sides. No leaders of the civil war escaped with pristine hands. Not Slobodan Milosevic, not Franjo Tudjman, not Alija Izetbegovic. It is all the more tragic that Yugoslavia, a seeming model of ethnic integration and a pluralistic national identity, should have unraveled with such venom, where rape and civilian murder stained European soil, and ribs poked from the emaciated flesh of men rounded up in concentration camps.

Yet for me the iconic memory of Mladic's paunchy swagger embodies the crushing brutality of the Balkan tempest: Caliban rampant amidst smouldering ruins, Miranda ravished and bleeding, and Prospero dead. Brave new world, indeed, that has such people in it.

In the spring of 1999, as NATO warplanes bombed Belgrade to hasten the separation of Kosovo from Serbia, I joined my friend Andy Knight at the podium of a public forum at the University of Alberta, where he chairs the Political Science department. In a sea of baleful stares, we set out our shared view that the NATO bombing of Belgrade was in fact illegal and criminal, despite the unctuous assurances to the contrary offered by the British prime minister Tony Blair (a character flaw he would manifest with far more lethal effect in cheering on the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, even though he had every reason to believe the intelligence was cooked).

By Blair's reckoning – like Bill Clinton, perhaps he didn't grasp the essence of the moral philosophy he was supposed to have learned at Oxford – the Belgrade bombing was supposed to protect the Muslims in Kosovo's civil war. Yet as Andy and I pointed out, the intervention – unlike the UN-ordered invasion of Afghanistan after September 2001 – was neither initiated nor sanctioned by the United Nations, and thus could not be justified under international law.

The forum's "question period" demonstrated that quite a few folks hadn't really come to listen. Before we could finish Andy and I were pinned against the classroom wall by large, wild-eyed men who couldn't quite grasp that we agreed with them in reproaching the NATO attack. Chests heaving, these fellow Canadians insisted on drawing historical timelines and elaborate mathematical constructions on the board to "prove" Kosovo must remain the cradle of Serbian national identity; insisting upon our agreement with bursts of garlicky eloquence.

This was the moment I fully understood the truth Wystan Auden captured the day the Second World War began, in his resonant poem *September 1, 1939*; sitting in "one of the dives on 52nd Street, uncertain and afraid," as "the clever hopes expire of a low dishonest decade":

*For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.*

That "error bred in the bone" continues to drive the discontent violence of much of the world today. The calamitous 20th century may be behind us, yet the culture of violence continues to dominate the first years of the 21st. Spending on armaments and armies is at record levels, dozens of armed conflicts consume the resources that could be used to uplift the human condition. We have known for decades that sustainable human development depends on disarmament, yet that truth lies buried in the new spasms of tribalism and bloodletting.

The South African leader Nelson Mandela says we need to imagine an entirely new political culture. Rather than violence, domination, and conquest, we need to establish a culture of human rights. This goes far beyond a code of law or a catalogue of violations. In essence, it speaks of the birthright of every human being to live a life free from fear, free from want, with the ability to fulfill one's potential in a peaceable and clement society.

I have been fortunate in the past decade or so to work with a remarkable group of people from many parts of the world to advance this vision. Convened by the indefatigable Shulamith Koenig, the People's Movement for Human Rights Learning spreads the notion that our dignity is inalienable, that we are born not only with inherent rights and freedoms, but with the responsibility to care for one another's well being. I believe the time is right to offer Alberta as the place where this vision can become an enduring reality. As the province embarks on a review of its social policy framework, this is the higher aspiration we can pursue.

A decade ago I wrote a book, *The Best Country: Why Canada Will Lead the Future* (you can download it at amazon.com), exploring the years that Canada spent atop the United Nations human development index. I argued that Canada was ideally suited to offer a template for how human beings from every stream of experience could come and live together in peace and prosperity.

Canada's position atop the human development index was born from the progressive political consensus that governed this country after the Second World War. Progressive Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker introduced Canada's first human rights legislation in the Bill of Rights, advocated nuclear disarmament, launched the commission that recommended universal and publicly funded health care. His Liberal successors carried through on those initiatives, and repatriated the Constitution from Great Britain with a strengthened human rights framework.

The vision set out in *The Best Country* hasn't evolved as quickly as I had hoped: We continue to be afflicted with a bronze medal mentality. The current federal government, for instance, shies away from the global leadership that has been a hallmark of previous Canadian governments. It is more comfortable with tactical efficiency than visionary ambition, as though cheerless competency is the highest aspiration of governance.

Rather than pursuing this leadership on a national scale, it might be wiser to begin with our own province, Alberta. We are well placed to deliver on the two foundational human rights: Freedom from Fear, and Freedom from Want. We need both the personal commitment – remember, leadership begins in the mirror – and the political will to replace charity with dignity as the moral and ethical framework of our social policy.

As the new Alberta government embarks on an ambitious social policy framework – the first time in three decades we have taken a comprehensive run at rethinking our societal development – we can indeed aspire to a province where women and men can live in the full enjoyment of their human rights, and the unfettered exercise of our human responsibility to one another and to our biosphere.

We can show this leadership because, in a very real sense, we are genetically programmed for the universal love Auden evokes. One day over an amiable summer lunch at the late (and lamented) Il Portico restaurant, the renowned crystallographer Michael James showed me a video of sub-atomic particles organising themselves into a well-functioning nano machine to move a molecule across a surface. In the deepest essence of our cellular architecture, we are hard-wired to work together: this quite literally is the meaning of our ability to love with every fibre of our being.

Yet how do we replicate this cellular programming at the level of society, and the trillions of collaborating atoms that form the perceptible world? How do we reconcile self-organising nano motors with the bloodthirsty Balkan whims that seek to eradicate otherness?

We Albertans can begin to be that change we want to see in the world, by moving from charity to dignity as the foundation of our province's societal development.

Our societal development model should be a genuine and ongoing partnership between citizens, their elected political servants, and the public servants and officials engaged to help fulfill the needs and aspirations of the community.

This is the heart of social policy: not merely dealing with our ills, but nurturing and building the quality of the society we all share and the opportunities it presents. Alberta should settle for nothing less than achieving Freedom from Fear and Freedom from Want. These simple yet essential goals can bring us to a province where women and men can live together with dignity, in community, in harmony with one another and with our natural world.

Since the first arrival of the first people at least 13,000 years ago – the pioneers who established themselves and evolved into Alberta’s First Nations – nearly every stream of human experience has found a home in this province.

Yet the gap in the quality of life experienced by aboriginal Albertans and the settlers who displaced them remains staggering. Residential schools, removing children from parents and traditional communities, the limited opportunities available to First Nations who live on reserves, are all the legacy of a cruel past. The challenge is how we can turn the mistakes – and the pain they continue to foster – into a viable and inclusive future for all.

The real milestone is to pass well beyond the “tolerance” that many societies preach, to a genuine affection and engagement with one another.

This is true not just in the social and cultural milieus, but in the economic and entrepreneurial vigour that emerges when people of different backgrounds and experiences pool their collective strengths.

Social policy, even when it deals with societal ills, should be predicated on human development: particularly to those among us impeded by poverty, addictions and fear. Ideally, people who wish to escape such circumstances would get the necessary help to move from risk to safety, from safety to the skills and capacity required to support themselves, and then to full participation and inclusion in society. This is the blueprint for building Freedom from Fear, and Freedom from Want.

This pursuit will demand such building blocks as health security, a high standard of education, equity of opportunity, and above all a stable and peaceable society. These in turn provide the social policy that enables Albertans and their governments to make the most of all we have and are.

Social policy, societal development and social cohesion are interconnected and interdependent goals. To fulfill Alberta’s opportunity, it is essential that communities have the ability to come together, and work together, to design their preferred future.

Increasingly, the world is driven by networks – by connections between people each building on the other’s strengths. In this world, those who are nimble and adaptive and able to form connections will flourish far better than monolithic, monocultural societies or business entities that find it difficult to operate beyond their own limited view and experience of “the right way” to do things.

Sustainable and authentic social policy requires a process that fosters and assists close co-operation and collaboration between citizens and the three orders of government they elect.

It requires a multi-year commitment of resources, and a consistent commitment of continued interest and engagement on the part of governments, to give Albertans the confidence to believe their leaders will deliver future aligned with their values and priorities.

And we already have the freedom and openness we need. In Alberta, it's not unusual to find relationships of trust built over e-mail and telephone, by people who may not have physically met one another. Find the connection, create the network, and pursue the opportunity.

In this first-name culture, cutting-edge enterprises look at merit rather than pedigree, and people at the top got there by being comfortable, observant, and open to new ideas and experiences.

This applies not just to physical communities, but also to communities of common interests. The quality of living in a community goes beyond social needs. It includes local, regional and provincial decisions regarding water, land use, air quality, biodiversity, habitat protection, conservation, preservation, reclamation, recreation and smart growth.

By looking at social and economic issues as intersecting and overlapping themes, it is easier to gain an understanding of how building collaborative capacity and connectedness can unleash opportunity and reengage in building the province of their aspirations.

We know that growth is not "cost free" because governments need to make investments to accommodate growth pressures. People attracted to Alberta by its evident economic strength also need to know that they will be able to find safe and amenable housing commensurate with their income, schools that will enable their children to flourish, recreational opportunities and community services that help migrants become residents.

Thus we aim to build a stronger degree of citizen engagement and participation in societal development. It should lead to strong local input regarding facilities for health care, education, economic development, arts, culture, government services; social services for children, elderly and disadvantaged populations; infrastructure and transportation; housing, policing, fire services, and others.

The catalyst for all of this is our elected representation: the fellow citizens to whom we delegate the stewardship of our society. A new legislature, with at least three dozen members elected for the first time, is a glorious opportunity to refresh our thinking and remake our society. It is this generational injection of new blood, that renews my optimism for the future of our province. More importantly, it is a gathering of members that very much reflects Alberta's diversity.

Our Albertan answer to the extreme ethnicity and violent tribalism represented in the Ratko Mladic trial began with the very act of assembly last week, as the newly-elected Members of the Legislative Assembly took their seats for the first time.

Seen from the Members' Gallery, the scene was in every way an astonishing contrast to the House I came to in 1975, as a reporter for the *Red Deer Advocate*, as the first person of colour to serve in the Legislature Press Gallery.

As members of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra performed in the space where my chair used to be, I marvelled at the gender shift in the leadership of both the government and the official opposition.

I found it deeply satisfying that the longest serving member of the assembly, Lesser Slave Lake MLA Pearl Calahasen, is descended from the First Nations who came to this land so many thousands of years ago.

And I was pleased to hear Ukrainian spoken from the Speaker's chair – perhaps for the first time – as Hon. Gene Zwozdesky introduced his 90-year-old mother. Given all that Alberta can become, and our enormous potential to remain a model of inclusion where the entire world can flourish, it seemed appropriate that the words were “I love you.”

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