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Keough, Noel; Ghitter, Geoff

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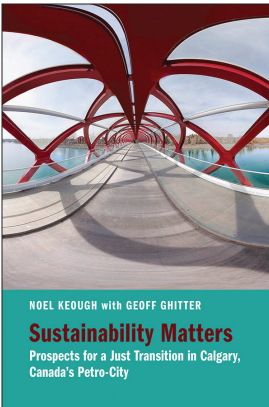
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SUSTAINABILITY MATTERS: PROSPECTS FOR A JUST TRANSITION IN CALGARY, CANADA'S PETRO-CITY

by Noel Keough with Geoff Ghitler

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citizens—the lubricants of our democratic system. We present a summary of the five proposals for improved governance put forward by Sustainable Calgary.

In “Democracy on the Ropes,” we look at the corrosive influence of money and corporate power in politics. Who pays for election campaigns? Who gets access to our political decision-makers? What are the implications of these questions of funding and access for our participation in elections and the level of trust in our systems of governance?

Can we learn from other places? Of course we can. In “The Gift That Keeps On Giving,” we turn our attention to the Nordic countries. It turns out that these countries combine high levels of trust, economic equality, and social stability with highly competitive, sustainable, and innovative economies. The secret ingredient might just be good governance.

Other essays place the issue of governance at the heart of real-life decisions about whether and how cities and our province should grow and who bears the costs of growth. We make the case that the public good and private profit maximization are at odds with each other, and that strong governance must deliver good public policy for the common good. In “Silent Spring 2012,” we discuss global governance and the implications for a sustainable future. In 1992, at the Rio Earth Summit, the world’s governments agreed to make sustainability a priority. We discuss why we, as a global community, have faltered in honouring that commitment and what the implications are of the failure to do so.

BEYOND THE LAW OF THE JUNGLE: GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

Think about all the decisions that each of us must make when choosing among insurance, energy, cable, and phone companies and their plans. The game seems to be that if a company can pull the wool over your eyes, rip you off, or in any other way extract extra cash from your pocket—good for them, and too bad you were so gullible and naïve.

There is a variation on this theme in public life. We elect politicians who assure us of their honesty and their desire to serve us, their constituents, but we know that they must be watched diligently and are usually not to be trusted. If they do bad things—well, we elected them. While there

may be a grain of truth in the statement that we get the government we deserve, accepting this simplistic notion feeds a pervasive and corrosive sentiment—a competitive, every man-for-himself, trust-nobody ethos that permeates our lives, both public and private.

Do we really want to live our lives that way, in a society where we have to be hyper-vigilant and where the less capable are at the mercy of snake oil salesmen and shell-game con artists? The capitalist *modus operandi* of self-interest above all else has infiltrated our lives to a very unhealthy degree, and we let politicians and salespeople off too easy when we acquiesce to this state of affairs. Businesses seem intent on creating not a menu of choices but a minefield of options designed to separate people from their hard-earned money. Grocery stores lure us in with bargains but place items with jacked-up prices at the checkouts. Mortgage insurance agreements fill pages with finely printed caveats to avoid paying out when hardship strikes.

Political parties game the system too. They master the strategy of boutique tax breaks and legislation whose sole aim is to gain the vote of some narrow but valuable constituency. Attack ads have become part of doing politics. Never mind debate on ideas—just rip your opponent’s reputation to shreds with lies, innuendo, half-truths, and distortions. Even the line between legal and illegal gets not so delicately straddled with robocall tactics.¹ Government scientists and parliamentary auditors get muzzled when the truth is inconvenient.²

“It’s just human nature,” people often say. But this is not our nature: it is a behaviour that has been nurtured by a particular style of governance. So if we reject the law of the jungle, then how should we govern ourselves? In a 2014 workshop hosted by Sustainable Calgary, a group of citizens gave up a Saturday and took on the question of good governance and how we might measure it, and they actually seemed to have a lot of fun doing it. They came up with five good ideas for better governance.

1. *Improve the quality of electoral democracy.* Because many of us do not bother to vote, the outcomes of voting are seldom representative of popular sentiment. We are all familiar with dismal voter turnouts, but many people are discouraged by our

first-past-the-post system, by which a minority of votes typically results in a majority government, or we send a representative to Ottawa with the consent of as little as 10 percent of eligible voters, as happened in the 2014 Calgary Centre byelection.

2. *Provide the resources government needs to do what it does best.* Though it seems the Canadian Taxpayers Federation has never seen a problem a tax cut could not solve, a more pragmatic and effective approach would be to ensure that all levels of government get sufficient funds to carry out their responsibilities and that they distribute the resources we entrust them with in an equitable manner.
3. *Ensure that governance—whether in the public, private, or not-for-profit sector—is independent, transparent, and accountable.* Elections should not be won and lost based on who attracts the most money from anonymous economic interests promoting agendas. If organizations lobby governments, we should know who pays the bills for their activities. We should have access to records of the meetings between our elected representatives and those lobbyists. How our representatives vote should be made public. How and why decisions were taken should be more transparent and not locked in so-called cabinet confidence.
4. *Ensure that government prioritizes educating citizens about how government works.* Citizens should be given the opportunity for meaningful participation in the decisions that affect their lives beyond the important but limited act of voting. After all we are a democracy—which means “government by the people.”
5. *Evaluate and report on the government’s effectiveness.* Government strategies, policies, and plans should not be derailed by professional incompetence, short-term political manoeuvres, or interference from powerful economic interests.

It is not too much to expect honesty from our politicians. Nor should it be too much to expect businesspeople to deal ethically and in good faith.

Next time a sitting or aspiring politician comes looking for your vote, ask them what they will do to support these five pillars of good governance.

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING: LESSONS IN GOVERNANCE FROM THE NORDIC LIGHTS

Over the past decade, we have been exposed to a steady stream of issues related to governance—and election processes, in particular—that signals a crisis of governance, both in Calgary and more generally across the landscape of democracies the world over. Mayor Nenshi has been praised for his advocacy of stricter fundraising guidelines in municipal politics, and indeed, the rules were tightened up by the Notley government.³ But fifteen months into the term of the Kenney government, we see the rules under the Elections Act being dismantled to allow money more influence in our electoral system.⁴ A cloud hangs over the 2019 election of Premier Kenney, with allegations of illegal funding of party leadership campaigns under investigation. South of the border, democracy seems to be under siege on several fronts.

Governance is nothing more than how we organize ourselves and how we make decisions. What happens when good governance—transparent, efficient, and fair—goes bad? When promises are broken and secret deals are made? Citizens, having become cynical about our leaders and our institutions, don't bother to vote. People retreat from civic life and become more individualistic—if nobody is looking out for me, then I won't bother looking out for anyone else. We waste money on litigation and tie ourselves in legal knots rather than reap the abundant harvests borne of nurturing seeds of trust and reciprocity. The gun ownership nightmare in the US is an extreme outcome of the erosion of trust.

Still, there are good news stories. In Calgary, we have tended to look south for our inspiration, but what do the Nordic countries have to offer when it comes to good governance? A lot, it turns out. In 2009 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development began reporting on a set of sustainable governance indicators (SGIs) for forty-one countries. To construct the SGI index, they asked questions like the following: Do tax policies realize the goals of equity, competitiveness, and the generation of sufficient public revenues? Are the media independent,

and do they express a diversity of opinions? Is corruption prevented? Does government implement policy effectively?⁵

The SGI index includes thirty-three different measures, including electoral process, rule of law, civil rights, and economy. The Policy Performance sub-index uses sixteen measures to evaluate the capacity of government to formulate, coordinate, and implement economic, social, and environmental policy.⁶ In 2020 Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark took the top four spots in the Quality of Democracy sub-index and spots 2, 2, 6 and 1, respectively, in the Governance sub-index. Canada ranked eleventh in Quality of Democracy and seventh in Governance.⁷

In its special feature of January 2013, the free market standard-bearer *The Economist* asked, What's up with Nordic countries?⁸ They found that these socialist nirvanas outperform most others in surprising categories. Most people are familiar with the notion that Nordic countries have more egalitarian societies, are quite liberal socially, and champion international justice. What people are less aware of is that in the midst of Europe's 2008–13 economic meltdown, Nordic countries were bastions of stability. They are also among the most competitive, transparent, fair-dealing, innovative, and creative countries in the world. *The Economist* calls them a “hothouse of entrepreneurship,” one funky example being the wildly successful initiative at Helsinki's Aalto University called the Startup Sauna, a meeting place designed to support student-run startups and young entrepreneurs.⁹

Nordic countries seem to show a remarkably pragmatic approach to trying new approaches to public service delivery, from schools to health care. No doubt the openness to change and experimentation comes from high levels of that most precious and stable of currencies—trust.

Ultimately, good governance is a means to improved well-being. And as we see in Nordic countries, that's exactly where good governance leads. These countries are perennially at the top of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index—Norway (1), Iceland (6), Sweden (8), Denmark (11), and Finland (12) all ranked above Canada (13).¹⁰ In 2015 Nordic countries (Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden) all ranked above Canada in the Gini Index of income equality.¹¹ The kicker is that—as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue rigorously in their acclaimed 2010 bestseller, *The Spirit Level*—the most

important factor in well-being is, in fact, equality.¹² The special focus on Nordic countries in the *2020 World Happiness Report* is consistent with this finding.¹³

Why are these countries more equal? How do they weather the foul economic winds sweeping across Europe? And how did this relatively small population huddled in the north of Europe manage to become leaders in innovation and creativity? The answer is that good governance—carefully constructed, nurtured, and sustained—gives birth to highly egalitarian, trusting, innovative, and economically successful societies. You might say it's the gift that keeps on giving.

Of particular relevance to Calgarians, the crowning achievement of all that good governance and its accoutrements is having some of the most sustainable cities in the world—Helsinki in Finland, Copenhagen in Denmark, and Stockholm and Malmo in Sweden.

As citizens of this great city, we have regular opportunities to engage in this conversation about good governance, a topic that is often considered mundane. It is a notion that will, we hope, continue to figure prominently in the campaigns of candidates, new and incumbent, across the political spectrum and at all levels of government. It is, in truth, far from mundane or of little consequence. There is nothing more central to the sustainability of our city and the future well-being of our children than good governance. As the celebrated 1970s ParticipAction campaign urged—just ask the average sixty-year-old Swede.¹⁴

SACRED TRUST: WITHOUT IT, WE'RE LOST

As we entered the 2020s, there was a lot of hand-wringing at Calgary's City Hall. In December 2019, the top civil servant, David Duckworth, was defending city spending in the face of calls by some councilors that spending was out of control and trust in government was broken.¹⁵ In the early weeks of 2020, there were calls for resignation as another councilor was under siege for “misreporting” on expense claims.¹⁶ Not to be outdone, the provincial government was under fire from multiple fronts, charged with having broken trust with teachers, people dependent on disability benefits, health care workers, and municipal governments.¹⁷

In this age of fake news, increasingly polarized political debate, the weaponization of social media, and an increasingly complex public discourse blending economics, politics, and science, trust has become a hot commodity. Many commentators have noted that in this political environment, most people are unable to discern the finer points of debate and default to a simple question—Who do I trust? Especially in leadership contests, pundits like to debate whether aspirants to political office are “trustworthy.” But trustworthiness is not a characteristic like hair colour; trust has to be earned through deeds. Trust building is a long-term project, but trust breaking can happen in an instant.

It is therefore concerning to see the many signs of eroding trust across most institutions of governance at all political scales. We see evidence of this trend in a Statistics Canada census survey on confidence in Canadian institutions, in the City of Calgary’s annual Citizen Satisfaction Surveys, and in the 2017 OECD report *Trust and Public Policy*.

In 2013, according to the Statistics Canada General Social Survey, only 43 percent of Calgarians had some or a great deal of confidence in the federal Parliament, and a mere 34 percent had confidence in major corporations. The highest levels of trust were reported for the school system (63%) and the police (81%). Calgarians reported having more confidence in institutions than the average of all cities across Canada, where levels of confidence in police, government, and corporations were 76, 39, and 30 percent, respectively. Levels of confidence in the police in Moncton, Oshawa, Guelph, and Abbotsford-Mission range from 86 percent to 82 percent. Residents of St. John’s and Edmonton registered the most confidence in the school system (both at 66%). Only Toronto (45%) outperformed Calgary for confidence in Parliament. Hamiltonians reported the most confidence in corporations (38%), followed by Winnipeg and St. John’s (36%). Victorians had the lowest confidence in corporations (26%), and Halifax had the lowest in Parliament (27%).¹⁸

These data highlight some serious problems when we examine how few people expressed “a great deal of confidence.” Only 9 percent of Canadians had a great deal of confidence in the media, only 10 percent said that of Parliament, and only 6 percent expressed this about major corporations.¹⁹ These findings have serious implications for our democracy and our economy—even more so since we have entered a period when some leaders

seem to have decided that lying and deception are winning strategies. The combination of ownership concentration of social media, technological innovation, and polarization in society has undermined our willingness to trust our institutions and those who represent them.

When asked whether the City of Calgary practices open and accessible government, is working to improve citizens' input, and uses their input in decision-making, and whether citizens have meaningful input, roughly 60 to 80 percent of Calgarians said yes. But in all areas surveyed in the Citizen Satisfaction Surveys, the trend is negative, with the downward trend being most pronounced with respect to open and accessible government. Those who expressed trust in City Hall fell from 62 percent in 2017 to 52 percent in 2019, to 48 percent in fall 2020. Levels of distrust rose from 15 percent in 2017 to 21 percent in 2020.²⁰

The 2017 OECD report *Trust and Public Policy* highlights a noticeable reduction in trust in government after the 2008 global economic crisis (from 2007 to 2015). The report states that “against a background of perceived inequalities in income and opportunities, high unemployment and job insecurity, resistance to globalisation and concern over global pressures such as migration and climate change, restoring this trust is essential.”²¹ Notably, Canadians express high levels of trust in comparison to most OECD countries, though Canada still lagged behind the Nordic countries.²² This may be related to the relatively mild impact of the 2008 crisis on Canada. Canadians, for example, are almost as confident in banks as they are in the school system.²³

In Canada, unlike most other countries, confidence in institutions was higher among immigrants than those born in Canada and even higher for recent immigrants. But trust is not uniform across demographic boundaries. Women and older Canadians express higher levels of confidence than men and younger Canadians. Aboriginal people are less confident in institutions than other Canadians. Canadians with higher incomes and higher levels of education express higher levels of confidence.²⁴

Trust is a valuable and fragile currency that bolsters the social and economic health of a community. Trust builds social cohesion and social capital and is in turn strengthened by social capital. Without trust, information flow and communication are slowed and compromised, and policy reform in areas like fair taxation and climate change is made more

difficult. Low levels of trust have economic costs—high transaction costs, higher legal fees, more complicated contracts, slower transactions, risk aversion for investors, and non-compliance with regulations. Low levels of trust translate into low voter turnouts and resistance to change. They also lead to alienation and reluctance to support social welfare programs.²⁵ Citizens expect institutions to be reliable, responsive, and efficient. They expect them to act with integrity, openness and transparency, and fairness. If institutions fail to deliver on these values, people will withdraw their support, and that is bad for everyone.

In 1984 George Orwell imagined an authoritarian regime with Big Brother obsessed with making sure people did not trust each other.²⁶ Margaret Atwood, in a 2017 interview in *The New Yorker*, remarked that in the US “you really don’t trust your fellow-citizens very much,” and her choice to situate the rise and fall of Gilead in the US was perhaps inspired by that observation.²⁷ Certainly, in the US of 2020, the president has done everything in his power to foment distrust of everything and everyone except himself—a dangerous game. When our leaders toy with trust, they play with fire.

DEMOCRACY ON THE ROPES: MONEY, ACCESS, AND THE PERVERSITY OF FIRST-PAST-THE-POST

In December 2012, Calgary City Council’s Legislative Task Force debated rules for reporting gifts to the mayor and Council. We learned that though the mayor apparently has a stash of gifted coffee mugs and socks and has never received anything valued over about \$100, he believes rules are required to “avoid the appearance of impropriety” in Council decision-making.²⁸

The discussion about gifts and governance might seem rather mundane. But in that same week, Council’s debate on a growth management motion initially drafted by the development industry provided a clear example of why good governance is critical to the future of our democracy.²⁹

Climate change is another governance issue of municipal, provincial, and federal concern. Though the science and economics of climate change leave no doubt about the urgency of decisive action, and although polls consistently show that Canadians want to see real action, our government

has dithered for forty years. The reasons for this are many, but chief among them is the sorry state of our governance. The makeup of Parliament does not represent Canadian opinion when our first-past-the-post system disproportionately awards seats to the dominant party, the fossil fuel industry lobby shapes provincial government policy, shadowy political campaign financing erodes democracy, and too many Canadians have given up on an unrepresentative electoral system.

In the 2012 Calgary Centre byelection, the self-identified “progressives” won over 60 percent of the vote. But with no progressive candidate having a decisive edge, the Conservatives, with 37 percent of a dismal voter turnout of 29.4 percent, won the right to represent Calgary Centre on the strength of the support of only 11 percent of eligible voters.³⁰ This is not an atypical result. In 2012 the Conservatives held a majority in Parliament, having gamed the system to win 54 percent of parliamentary seats while capturing only 38 percent of votes cast—and a mere 23 percent of eligible voters.³¹

If this were an anomaly, we might chalk it up to bad luck, but this happens regularly in federal and provincial elections. In British Columbia in 1996, the New Democrats actually lost the popular vote yet won a majority in the provincial legislature.³² Even more incredibly, in New Brunswick in 1987, Frank McKenna’s Liberals won 60 percent of the vote—and every seat!³³

In a report funded by the University of Calgary Institute for Advanced Policy Research, our city was found to have one of the most lax election campaign finance regimes in the country.³⁴ The development industry is a much more prominent campaign financier here than in, for example, Toronto. The lion’s share of the industry’s dollars go to incumbents, with the result that sitting councilors and mayors are less likely to be challenged and more likely to win than in the more balanced process in Toronto.

The Polaris Institute report *Big Oil’s Oily Grasp* raised the veil on yet another governance issue—lobbying. Between 2008 and 2012, the country’s largest oil and gas companies and industry associations registered 2,733 communications with federal bureaucrats and politicians. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) was responsible for 536 of those communications. Along with the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association, CAPP recorded 78 percent more communications than the

two primary Canadian mining industry associations and 367 percent more than the two major automotive industry associations.³⁵ The report chronicled the extent of the revolving door between senior bureaucracies (including the National Energy Board), industry, Conservative party insiders, and the high-powered lobby groups that support the effort.

This rapid increase in oil and gas industry lobbying coincided with the gutting of the Fisheries Act, the rewriting of over seventy federal laws via Bill C-38, and a major multimedia public relations effort by both government and industry designed to counter increasing opposition to the tar sands. The fallout from all of this? Huge numbers of Canadians have given up on our electoral system. Calgary's municipal voter turnout has oscillated between a dismal 18 percent in 2004 to a barely respectable 58 percent in 2017.³⁶ Provincially, voting rates of 80+ percent in the 1930s have plummeted to as low as 40 percent in 2008, and they rarely top 60 percent.³⁷ Federally, in election after election, we struggle to hit the 70 percent mark, with a clear downward trend since the early 1960s.³⁸

Governance is really about how we as a society make decisions. Good decision-making requires robust, fair, and transparent processes—and an engaged citizenry!

BOOMS, BUSTS, AND BUDGETS

In a June 2020 column, CBC journalist Drew Anderson asked the unthinkable: Should Calgary plan for contraction? Anderson proposed that “Calgary will either have to find a way to pay for a vision of growth, or to tactically shrink in a way that doesn't bring down the house in the process.”³⁹ Joseph Arvai, professor of sustainable enterprise at Michigan University, had posed a similar dilemma in the *Globe and Mail* in 2013. Arvai wrote, “If the city stays on its current industrial and economic trajectory, Calgary's fate—like that of Detroit before it—will be sealed *when* (not if) a downward shift in demand for current, made-in-Alberta industrial products occurs.”⁴⁰

With those simple statements, one of the most enduring tales of our time lies exposed—that economic growth, the prime directive, is synonymous with prosperity and well-being for all. Certainly, almost every institution of our society subscribes to this growth myth, including City Council,

the Chamber of Commerce, and Calgary Economic Development. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida tell us it's all about attracting the best and the brightest, the creatives and investors, because therein lies the recipe for growth.⁴¹

One often-heard refrain at any hint of anti-growth sentiment focuses on its inevitability: What are you going to do, turn people back at the city gates? Well no, but let's be clear what has fuelled and sustained growth in Calgary. It's oil and gas. We have been the most single-industry-dependent city in Canada and perhaps North America. In 2018 almost 30 percent of our city's GDP and over 70 percent of our province's export earnings were generated from oil and gas.⁴² For more than forty years, that industry manufactured jobs at an incredible rate. As many as forty thousand new Calgarians arrived annually to fill those jobs, and even now, with the highest unemployment in the country, Canadians are drawn to the lure of the next big boom.

Conventional wisdom has it that the pace of oil and gas development was dictated by the oil companies, their ability to attract capital investment and market forces as immutable as gravity. But wait a minute—resource management is a provincial responsibility in Canada. Almost all oil and gas development occurs on public land that the provincial government is solely responsible for leasing to industry. *It is the gatekeeper!* Yet in the magical belief that business and shareholder profit maximization is synonymous with the prosperity and well-being of all Albertans, that growth is good and more growth is better, our government signed that responsibility over to industry.

With such fabulous riches, our prosperity and well-being must surely have been off the charts. Not so! Between 2000 and 2014, Calgarians saw housing prices more than triple, homelessness increase almost ten-fold, record per capita usage of food banks, a worsening daycare crisis, chronic shortages of hospital beds and classrooms, and the second-lowest minimum wage in the country—not to mention those rising taxes. In the slow-growth years of 2015–19, each of these indicators improved through sound government policy.⁴³

Though Calgarians have spoken loudly and clearly against sprawl, when an economy is at full throttle, it is almost impossible for the inner city and other existing communities to absorb the annual pilgrimage of

newcomers. The easy option is going for the short-term gain of sprawling car-dependent communities and the inevitable long-term pain of a serious fiscal liability of expensive-to-maintain urban infrastructure for those sprawling communities. In a 2014 interview with the *Calgary Herald*, the city's chief financial officer, Eric Sawyer, pointed out that rapid growth "drives us further into the hole."⁴⁴ And in *Better Not Bigger*, community planning consultant Eben Fodor makes a persuasive case for improving our communities by controlling urban sprawl.⁴⁵

So why do we continue to ignore the elephant in the room—un-economic growth?

American political scientist Clarence Stone coined the term "urban regimes" to describe how influential economic players create informal coalitions with each other and with local governments to spin a tale about the unassailable virtues of growth and shape cities into what sociologist Harvey Molotch called "growth machines."⁴⁶ If we imagine Calgary as a growth machine, it is not hard to identify who has their hands on the throttle—large suburban developers, homebuilders, and civil engineering firms. They have grown fabulously rich on the strength of Calgary's suburban sprawl. The end of growth would mean the end of their business model.

As long as personal consumption keeps going up, Calgarians are loath to question the logic of the growth machine. We still boast the highest GDP per capita in Canada, the highest incomes and highest consumer spending in all of Canada, and we are at or near the top of the heap globally.⁴⁷ We are arguably the most affluent society in the history of our species. But are we any happier and healthier than other Canadians? Atlantic Canadians have long reported greater levels of happiness than their wealthier neighbours, though there are signs that oil wealth is actually diminishing Newfoundlanders' sense of well-being.⁴⁸

So what is our end game? At 4 percent growth, we will be twice as rich in eighteen years and four times as rich in thirty-six years. Our grandchildren can look ahead to ten thousand-square-foot homes, eight cars in the garage, a flat screen on every wall, a computer in every room—including all twelve bathrooms. Yes, it's absurd.

Perhaps before every year's budget deliberations, Council should convene a city-wide debate, with special invitations to all MLAs and MPs, on how much is enough.

SILENT SPRING 2012: SUSTAINABILITY VISION BETRAYED

Tragedy silently unfolded in Rio de Janeiro in the spring of 2012. Twenty years earlier, at a global summit held in the same Brazilian city, world leaders had agreed that economic justice and environmental stewardship were the twin challenges faced by humanity and that solving them did not have to be at the expense of a healthy economy. At Rio+20, they changed their minds. Economic growth was put back on its pedestal as the gold standard of global policy objectives, effectively abandoning twenty years of progress. Eight years later, in 2020, growth continues to be enshrined in documents like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.⁴⁹

This about-face came at a time when the diagnosis of the ongoing global crisis pointed toward the need for accelerated action on the sustainability vision first agreed to in Rio de Janeiro. What has been sold as an economic crisis is in fact an ongoing sustainability crisis, with social and ecological dimensions at its core. The social crisis is about the increasing gap between the rich and the rest. Since Rio 1992, the gap has grown to levels not seen since the lead-up to the Great Depression.

In *End This Depression Now*, Nobel economist Paul Krugman writes, "To understand the deeper reasons for our present crisis, in short, we need to talk about income inequality."⁵⁰ Krugman argues that inequality fuels bitter partisanship and has resulted in the hijacking of the political process by those with money who never hesitate to spend vast sums of it to get what they want.

Krugman's analysis confirms the ground-breaking research contained in Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*.⁵¹ Unequal societies suffer from higher rates of obesity, mental illness, and crime, and lower levels of trust, literacy, and social cohesion. Tragically, the lack of trust and social cohesion makes it much harder for societies to act on the economic and ecological crises.

There are many manifestations of the ecological crisis, but it is summed up in *Global Environmental Outlook 6*, released in 2019, where only fifteen of ninety-four environmental indicators were reported as having seen change in a positive direction. A UN press release announcing the report states that “damage to the planet is so dire that people’s health will be increasingly threatened unless urgent action is taken.” According to the executive director of UN Environment, “We are at a crossroads. Do we continue on our current path, which will lead to a bleak future for humankind, or do we pivot to a more sustainable development pathway? That is the choice our political leaders must make, now.”⁵²

The year 2012 also marked the twentieth anniversary of the decimation of the North Atlantic cod stock and the subsequent cod fishery moratorium in Newfoundland that threw sixty thousand rural Newfoundlanders out of work.⁵³ That ecological tragedy is a microcosm of the current global crisis—unsustainable economic growth drawing down the last of the planet’s resources, bringing the earth’s capacity to renew itself to the breaking point, and wreaking havoc on the economy. As ecological economist Herman Daly points out, we have crossed a threshold—growth is now *uneconomic*.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, world leaders remain myopically fixated on growth. With growth flagging in 2012, the European Central Bank, the Bank of England, and the People’s Bank of China took coordinated action to boost it.⁵⁵ Yet there was barely a whimper from these leaders about the unconscionable appropriation of wealth by the very few or the breaching of the limits of global ecosystems and the twin threats these pose to a truly sustainable economy. Tragically, it would appear that our leaders, while paying lip service to sustainability for thirty years, have understood nothing about the interrelationships between social, ecological, and economic systems or about limits to growth on a finite planet.

But why should Calgarians care? In 2012, seemingly impervious and oblivious to this unfolding tragedy, we celebrated one hundred years of the Calgary Stampede as we rode the Brahma bull of oil wealth with gusto. We were touted as a global energy superpower, and our material standard of living increased relentlessly.

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, things look quite different. Yet our provincial government and our corporate leaders

still seem singularly concerned with increasing the pace of economic growth—cut taxes for the rich, roll back regulation to allow more fossil fuel resource exploitation, leave ecological restoration for the next generation.⁵⁶ The cost of oil and gas well cleanup in Alberta stands at a staggering \$58.7 billion, with no plan to fund it.⁵⁷

Sadly, Canada was once considered one of the good guys and a key architect of the Rio Summit in 1992.⁵⁸ At the convening of Rio+20, we had become a pariah, slashing environmental legislation, actively undermining global environmental agreements, and twisting arms to persuade others to do the same.

Less than a year into his term and almost a decade after Rio+20, Premier Jason Kenney made it abundantly clear that his number one priority is a growing fossil fuel industry. If corporate taxes have to be slashed, environmental regulations gutted, social support programs and health and education funding eviscerated to make it happen, so be it.⁵⁹

Sixty years after the launch of the modern environmental movement with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, we find ourselves at a fork in the road. As Carson wrote, "We urgently need an end . . . to the sugar coating of unpalatable facts."⁶⁰ One such unsavoury fact is that our wealth is founded on a deeply unsustainable economic model.

We have a moral obligation to change the model and honour the definition of sustainable development agreed to at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit—to refuse to compromise future generations by our actions today. We have a historic opportunity to show international leadership. If we fail to take up the sustainability challenge, we will be a lesser city for it.

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