

WHAT TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2021

# THE WALRUS

CANADA'S CONVERSATION ♡

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## Rebuilding the Middle Class

A new vision for housing, taxation,  
child care, and more

THE O'HAGAN ESSAY  
ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Two Physicians  
on How to Fix  
Health Care

Plus

Inside the  
East Coast  
Lobster Wars



# Can Denser Be Better?

The idea that dense urban communities are bad for well-being is a myth. As it turns out, having more neighbours may actually help you live better



Watching COVID-19 devastate New York City, the most densely populated metropolitan centre in North America, made it easy to imagine that urban density is a problem. The soaring infection and mortality rates of early 2020 gave Canada's urban residents reason to consider a switch to country life – or at least more space in the suburbs.

But with COVID-19 cases popping up everywhere, from metropolises to small towns, experts are reassuring city dwellers that they can safely stay put rather than create more sprawl. In fact, public health researchers from Johns Hopkins University have found that people living in denser communities are not experiencing higher infection rates than their spread out counterparts. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) is also

increasingly recognizing that intensification, or creating denser communities, can play a positive role in addressing not only housing affordability but other challenges – such as access to services, health status, and climate change – that factor into where people choose to live. Here's how.

## ACCESS TO SERVICES

From leading-edge hospitals that tend to attract the best medical talent to specialized clinics for every kind of illness, health services can be superior in dense urban centres. "You simply can't offer the same level of service in smaller centres; it is just not economically justifiable," says Michel Tremblay, senior vice president of policy and innovation for CMHC. "You can't have cancer treatment centres everywhere, for example.

People in larger urban centres tend to have access to services, whether they are preventive in nature or at the treatment stage." Beyond health facilities, everyday needs such as groceries, libraries, and community support services are not only more numerous and varied in a city, but also easier to get to by walking, cycling, or public transit. Steve Mennill, chief climate officer for CMHC, explains that when services are walkable, people prefer to go on foot, which is the basis for an inherently healthy, active approach to living. "When you have car-oriented neighbourhoods and suburbs, people develop more sedentary lifestyles," he says.

The strong social connections forged in walkable communities can also act as a safety net in times of crisis. They create the conditions that allow community

members to come together and ensure their most vulnerable have resources, as many have done during the COVID-19 lockdown. Mennill further underscores that accessible community services and social supports – which can be limited in smaller, more sprawling cities – are vital to the health and well-being of vulnerable communities and low- and moderate-income families. And ensuring that these communities can get to and use them is less challenging when they're not far-flung. "Community services are much more available and easier to provide in a denser setting," he says.

## HEALTH OUTCOMES

There is a long-held North American belief that urban dwellers are less well than people in spread out communities, but this is simply not true. A Statistics Canada report notes that people living in rural areas have worse health outcomes – including higher incidences of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – than their urban counterparts due, in part, to limited access to services and lifestyle factors. According to Tremblay, the three provinces with the largest cities (Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia) actually have slightly higher life expectancy figures than other provinces.

Studies in the United States suggest urban density between 360 and 1,540 people per square kilometre leads to more walking. (In 2016, thirty-two Canadian urban areas had at least 360 people per square kilometre, and one had at least 1,160 people per square kilometre.) A less sedentary lifestyle decreases the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer, while increasing mental health and a sense of community belonging. Tremblay also points to the social benefit of inclusiveness, which is not so easily found in suburbs and exurbs. "If we favour a socially inclusive society, sprawl leads to more homogeneous clusters than in denser areas, which is counter to this goal," he says.

## HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

The sticker shock of housing prices in downtown Vancouver, Toronto, and, increasingly, Montreal neighbourhoods is hard to ignore. But a 2018 CMHC study revealed that commuting costs often offset any savings gained by moving to more affordable homes within the Greater Toronto Area.

So as suburban sprawl becomes a less and less affordable option for Canadians, where should we go? Easy – to dense urban neighbourhoods. Mennill says they don't have to be "the stereotype of impoverished slums" but rather well-designed, not crowded, places where people of all economic abilities can make their homes. "All over Europe, there are lots of examples of dense cities that are not high-rise: Paris, Copenhagen, Barcelona, Vienna, and Amsterdam are all very dense, but the way they've been designed makes for a highly liveable environment," he says.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

When it comes to daily life's carbon emissions, living in low-density suburbs can mean driving everywhere. "When you force everyone into cars for everything, you force them into high-carbon lifestyles whether they like it or not," says Mennill. He adds that there are also carbon costs associated with the municipal services necessary to keep up with suburban sprawl: road maintenance, snow removal, garbage pickup, fire protection, policing, and schools. Low-density housing also requires more road infrastructure and generally has less efficient energy use than in multi-unit homes.

Mennill stresses, however, that no housing benefit should be thought of in isolation. "Good housing is not just affordable, or just healthy, or just climate-friendly, or just socially inclusive. It has to be all those things," he says. "We should see good housing as a package, and density is one of the key ingredients to achieving all of these things simultaneously." ■



## Commuting: What does it really cost us?

Commuting may have changed during the pandemic, but certain habits remain the same. According to Statistics Canada, 84 percent of commuters who used personal motor vehicles before the pandemic were still using that mode of transportation to go to work in June. Here's what commuting looks like across the country.

Average car commute times for people living in urban centres\*:

**Toronto:**  
**28.7**  
minutes

**Vancouver:**  
**25.7**  
minutes

**Montreal:**  
**25.6**  
minutes

Number of commuters driving an hour or more each way\*:

**Toronto/GTA:**  
**642,934**

**Vancouver Metro:**  
**54,460**

**Montreal/GMA:**  
**183,301**

**19.9%**

Canada's total greenhouse gas emissions per year that come from personal-use cars and commercial-use cars and trucks\*\*

Canadians who report having "very stressful days"\*\*\*

**23%**  
of people commuting  
15 minutes or less

**36%**  
of people commuting  
45 minutes or more

\*Source: Statistics Canada, "Results from the 2016 Census: Long commutes to work by car"

\*\*Source: Prairie Climate Centre, "Where Do Canada's Greenhouse Gas Emissions Come From?"

\*\*\*Source: Statistics Canada, 2010 General Social Survey

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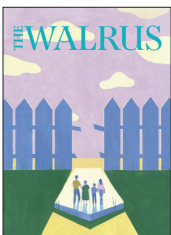
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Illustration by *Holly Stapleton*

Holly Stapleton is a freelance illustrator based in Toronto. Her work has been featured in *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the *Economist*.

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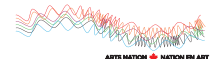


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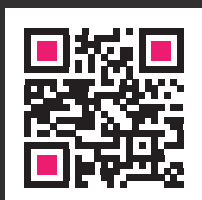
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**CANADA'S  
CONVERSATION**

# Editor's Letter

**I**N A 1969 address to the US National Press Club, then prime minister Pierre Trudeau famously declared: “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant.” It’s an analogy that has come to define the experience of sharing the world’s longest unmilitarized border. America has been cast as a land of opportunity, as a giant not to be alarmed, and of course, as the major power that sets the agenda for this part of the world. It’s hard to imagine a day when, if the elephant rolls over, Canada wouldn’t feel the impact.

As of last March, however, the elephant has been self-isolating. With the US–Canada border officially closed to nonessential travel as a result of the pandemic, there has been an unprecedented breach in the usual fluidity between our two countries. And, as the rest of the world watches the US battle its COVID-19 outbreak—one of the worst, partly due to mismanagement at the highest levels—it’s hard to escape the sense that the country has become something of an island. Of course, all of this hasn’t happened by itself: it’s had the help of Donald Trump.

The past four years of the Trump administration have had a wearying effect on America’s neighbours and allies—from the anxious negotiation of the CUSMA trade deal, ratified in 2020, to the country’s official withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change, which took effect this past November. The repercussions of actions like the banning of visitors from select Muslim-majority countries and the border separation of parents from their kids will be felt for years. America, you used to be the country that reflected the kind of success every nation hoped to achieve. Today, it feels like we hardly know you anymore.



As I write this, Joe Biden is the president-elect of the United States. Much has been made, throughout the lead up to the recent election, of the ideological differences between him and Trump and the implications of their respective leadership for the future of the US. (Biden has already promised, among other things, that the US will rejoin the Paris Agreement as one of his administration’s first acts.) But, regardless of the changes in the White House ahead, many of the immediate challenges Canada faces remain the same. The economic and social disruptions the pandemic has wrought over the past year mean we’re still forced to deal with lockdowns, quarantines, confusing school guidelines, job losses and interruptions, and the devastating loss of more than 10,000 lives in Canada as of this writing. The pandemic is the real superpower today.

With that in mind, in this issue of *The Walrus*, we are looking at how to move on.

The pandemic has demonstrated how quickly improvements can be made to Canada’s health care system when we put our minds—and resources—to them.

In this year’s O’Hagan Essay on Public Affairs, “The Myth of Universal Health Care,” surgeon and educator Nadine Caron and family doctor and hospital executive Danielle Martin use their observations from inside the medical system to posit what it would take to create a truly universal health care system. Another oft-cited measure of a country’s stability is the state of its middle class. In his essay, “How to Save the Middle Class,” Max Fawcett looks at the conventional metrics used by economists and politicians, such as GDP, with a view to whether they hold up—and lays out the benefits

of adapting to a new set of definitions for twenty-first century success and, dare we say it, well-being. (This article is also published as part of *Living Rooms*, a new series on housing and home, at [thewalrus.ca/livingrooms](http://thewalrus.ca/livingrooms).) And, in “The New Lobster Wars,” Zoe Heaps Tennant reports on the tensions between Mi’kmaw fishers, commercial fishers, and federal authorities in Nova Scotia—ultimately asking, How do we honour treaties that were signed in the 1700s and have never been fully implemented?

As we go into what will likely be another year full of big questions, there is still lightness to be found—some of it informed by lessons from 2020. For this double issue, we invited Canadian artists to illustrate what they’re looking forward to in 2021. The results paint a portrait of optimism, of expectations for change, and more than anything, of resilience. It is our hope that, in uncertain times, through the strength of our community and the scope of our imaginations, *The Walrus* can provide a bridge into the world to come. 🐘

—Jessica Johnson

# Contributors' Notes



**NADINE CARON**

*"The Myth of Universal Health Care,"*  
p. 50

"If we had a truly universal health care system, I could go to work knowing that what is possible is also attainable. I would have the ability to recommend home care for someone who's being discharged from the hospital, to facilitate specialist care, or to write a prescription knowing that, when the patient leaves my office, my recommendations for what would treat their symptoms and improve their quality of life would be available to them—that I wouldn't be causing them financial stress, for example. That vision fits who I want to be as a health care provider."

*Nadine Caron is Canada's first woman general surgeon of First Nations descent. She is the co-director of the Centre for Excellence in Indigenous Health at the University of British Columbia. She is from Sagamok Anishnawbek First Nation.*



**PATRICIA PEARSON**

*"Why Do We See Dead People?"* p. 72

"My interest in ghosts and grief began the year that my father and sister died within nine weeks of each other. My sister sensed the presence of our father in her bedroom the night that he died, not knowing that he *had* died. It was

a complete novelty to everyone in the family. And then she died a few weeks later. It was such a thunderclap of significance in my life at the time that it propelled me to explore experiences around death and dying."

*Patricia Pearson is the author of eight books, including Opening Heaven's Door: What the Dying May Be Trying to Tell Us about Where They're Going.*



**DANIELLE MARTIN**

*"The Myth of Universal Health Care,"*  
p. 50

"Watching the debates about health care reform in the US during the recent election—whether people were talking about the pandemic response or Medicare for All or the Affordable Care Act—was, to me, a sharp reminder that there are questions that don't go away. It's not as though you ever put the pen down on the development of a massive public good, like a health care system. You're always just moving to the next paragraph."

*Danielle Martin is a family physician and the executive vice-president of Women's College Hospital in Toronto.*



**LAURA GRIER**

*Artwork for "My Struggle with Sobriety,"* p. 78

"To illustrate this memoir, which is about overcoming alcohol addiction, I used a process called relief printmaking. I made ring-like prints with

the bottoms of various bottles. I also experimented with the types of marks that I could make with cigarettes, whether burn marks or by dipping cigarettes in ink. For me, printmaking is a coded process for telling a story. I try to create a large amount of meaning behind each mark. I used to be a smoker, and I'm very grateful that I don't smoke anymore. Quitting is a very long process."

*Laura Grier is a Déjüng First Nations artist and printmaker. Their work has been exhibited at Xpace Cultural Centre, Harcourt House, dc3 Art Projects, SNAP gallery, and ArtsPlace.*



**PAUL GALLANT**

*"Return of the Anti-Vaxers,"* p. 29

"In researching this article about anti-vaxers, I learned a lot about the vaccines for polio, the mumps, and diphtheria. Many laypeople nowadays don't know anything about diphtheria. But, when you look back into the past, you realize this disease wreaked havoc on society. It was a very present thing in people's lives, and the reason many of us don't know anything about it today is that it was essentially eradicated, in North America, by vaccines."

*Paul Gallant is a Toronto-based journalist who writes about social change, business, urban development, and travel.*

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# Letters



## OUR BETTER NATURE

I enjoyed Danielle Groen's piece "How to Vaccinate a Planet" (November/December), in which the challenges of rapidly creating and equitably distributing a COVID-19 vaccine were very well outlined. However, believing we can "defeat" the virus perpetuates the myth that humans transcend the laws of nature. Human activity is directly responsible for this pandemic: zoonotic diseases are consequences of our attempts to dominate nature. Resource extraction has devastated ecological and social well-being across the globe. If we continue on this course, we'll need new vaccines for the many pandemic-causing agents sure to come. Instead of barrelling headlong into disease, we must seek to live humbly, sustainably, and symbiotically within the natural systems of this planet.

*Leslie Solomonian*  
Toronto, ON

## THE LAST STRAW

Melissa J. Gismondi's excellent article on the history and psychology of homesickness ("Forever Homesick," November/December) brought to mind the olfactory sense's connection to memory. One rainy day some years ago, I visited my sister's home. As I approached her front steps, I saw that she had bought a straw welcome mat. I suddenly found myself holding back tears. I was bemused by my reaction until I recalled childhood summers spent on my grandparents' farm: walking cheerfully to see the cattle, picking strawberries in dewy grass, and playing in the old barn, whooping as I tumbled into the hay. My sister's wet mat had evoked the smells of faraway memories—of people and places that were joyous and real but now belong to the past.

*Mel Simoneau*  
Gatineau, QC

## EYE WIDE OPEN

In "Of Hope and Hobbits" (September/October), Thomas Homer-Dixon's analysis of *The Lord of the Rings*, he observes that the Fellowship does not triumph until collective action is taken against a common enemy. He then lists a series of humanity's real-world enemies—"greedy corporate elites, self-aggrandizing states, self-interested consumers, and ingrained patriarchy and racism"—without naming the contemporary Sauron uniting them all: capitalism. If we are not willing to collectively acknowledge the problem, there really is no hope.

*Steven Sladkowski*  
Toronto, ON

## THE LABOUR OF REBIRTH

Matthew Remski's investigation into Shambhala International ("The Wrong Side of the New Age," November/December) correctly points out that the Buddhist organization's leadership both enabled and committed abuse. We grew up in the Shambhala community. Reading survivors' stories and contemplating their pain is heartbreaking. It is a cautionary tale for all religious communities. But implying that we're all delusional cultists is misleading and wrong. Our community is not irredeemable, as the article seems to suggest. Many of us are demanding deep, systemic change so that authentic Buddhism can be held in environments that are safe and accountable.

*Ashoka Mukpo and Kate Baker Linsley*  
New York, NY

I am grateful to The Walrus for the article on Shambhala abuse survivors, whose voices have been deliberately suppressed within the community for so long. Remski hits on some vital points, like the dangerous belief that even criminal acts can be purified through Tantric "transmutation." It is a relief to see the hagiography we wove around Chögyam Trungpa being challenged at last, and

I hope this inspires others to tell their stories.

*Fred Coulson*  
Albuquerque, NM

## TUSK, TUSK

In the November/December issue, letter-writer Rolf Maurer's name was misspelled. The Walrus regrets the error.

.....  
"The time has come," The Walrus said, "to talk of many things." Send us a letter, email ([letters@thewalrus.ca](mailto:letters@thewalrus.ca)), or tweet, or post on our Facebook page. Comments may be published in any medium and edited for length, clarity, and accuracy.

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## SOCIETY

# The Case for Affordable Child Care

*The pandemic has underscored the need for a national child care program*

BY ANNE SHIBATA CASSELMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHELLE THEODORE



JENNY DAGGITT is a cardiac surgical ICU nurse, and her husband, Patrick, is a computer programmer. In 2017, when Jenny was three months pregnant, she put herself on thirty-three wait-lists of every and any type of child care, from community daycare programs to unlicensed outfits run out of

people's houses, within a thirty-minute walk from her home in East Vancouver. By the time her maternity leave ended, a year and a half later, she had heard of an opening at only one of the operations, but deemed it sketchy. Hiring a nanny, which, in Vancouver, could cost more than \$30,000 per year, was

unaffordable. So Patrick took paternity leave and Jenny picked up overtime to make up for the lost income. Eventually, they figured out a way for Patrick to work part-time and for Jenny to work twelve-hour night shifts and weekends so they could pay their bills *and* care for their daughter *and* not completely stall Patrick's career.

"I sleep when she's napping and go to work as soon as he gets home," Jenny explains. It's not just that the Daggitts can't afford to live off one income so the other parent can stay home with the baby. "We have two people working and we can't afford the what-ifs that come up," she says, breaking down their budget. Even if they had been offered a spot somewhere that felt safe, the fees would have been exorbitant. "It's crazy that it costs more to put your kid through daycare than it costs to put them through university," she says. With the median cost of infant daycare at \$1,400 a month in Vancouver, the annual cost of child care for a one-year-old can be nearly 2.5 times that of undergraduate tuition.

The Daggitts are more than an anecdote: they are emblematic. Most families with kids are working longer hours for less pay than they did a generation ago, reports the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Add the dismal availability of licensed child care spots and soaring daycare costs that run bills of \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year across the country, and it's no wonder that Canadian families feel disillusioned. A 2019 Statistics Canada survey found that one in four parents changed their work schedule, worked fewer hours, or postponed returning to work after parental leave because of difficulties finding child care. For one in ten parents, the cost of child care precluded their use of it.

This is a big problem and one that the pandemic, with its unerring ability to pull at the most threadbare of society's seams, has further exposed. Before the pandemic, there were approximately 2.4 million children under the age of five in Canada, and there were licensed child care spots for only a quarter of them. Now, three out of ten child care providers aren't even sure they'll reopen after many

were forced to close and lay off workers during lockdown. Experts conclude that our patchwork of child care options is failing to deliver the quality early childhood education that's shown to benefit young minds.

Canada now faces an urgent cost of inaction. The pandemic has exacted a steep toll, on women and single mothers most. Over March and April, 1.5 million women in Canada lost their jobs. The number of mothers who worked less than half their usual hours due to personal circumstances, such as caring for children or reducing shifts, has increased by 70 percent since the pandemic, according to Statistics Canada. And, for those who weathered the juggling act, the strain was considerable. One-third of Canadian women reported that they had considered leaving their job to focus on responsibilities at home.

"Child care really is a bridge, for so many, to jobs and being able to participate in the paid labour force," says Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now, a national child care advocacy organization. "There's huge pressure on the government to fix this bridge that particularly mothers depend on to get back into the labour force." Sure enough, six months after Sophie Grégoire Trudeau went into self-isolation with COVID-19 last March, leaving her husband to juggle their children and his job as prime minister, Justin Trudeau addressed the nation and promised to provide access to high-quality child care for all: "By creating a Canada-wide early learning and child care system, we will ensure that kids have access to care and that no parent, especially no mother, has to put their career on hold. This pandemic has reminded us all that building strong social supports is essential to growing the economy." Silver bullets are rare in social policy, but in child care, one does exist: set up high-quality, universal child care, advocates say, and it will benefit children,

families, and the country's economy. It's not the cure that's the mystery here but what took the good doctor so long to prescribe it.

**I**N 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women proposed a national child care program, stating that "the care of children is a responsibility to be shared by the mother, the father and society. Unless this shared responsibility is acknowledged and assumed, women cannot be accorded true equality." Half a century later, Canada

has yet to acknowledge that shared responsibility, and its women have yet to be accorded true equality, earning an average of 87 cents to every dollar earned by men despite achieving higher levels of education. The majority of the gender wage gap appears following the birth of a woman's first child.

When Canadian child care advocates talk about universal child care, they're not talking about free babysitting; they're talking early

childhood education blended with child care that is available to all, affordable (but not necessarily free), and noncompulsory. Governments would have a key role in planning, policy, and funding, but the care itself would be delivered by both public and nonprofit providers across various locations and hours. Early learning and child care fall under provincial jurisdiction, but like Medicare, they require federal leadership to be pushed over the line.

Instead, Canada has long relegated child care, defined as the care of a child by someone other than a parent or guardian, to the free market. "When you have an essential and important public service, like early childhood education and care, handed over to the market to deliver, you end up with market failure," says Ballantyne. Unaffordable and inaccessible child care leaves families to rope in relatives, hire nannies, share nannies with other families to split the expense, or turn to in-home daycares, some of

which are unlicensed. "You just know the desperation and anxiety in [parents'] voices as they're looking for spaces, and so it does come down to any port in the storm," says Don Giesbrecht, CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation. It's not like children are thriving under the status quo. More than one in four Canadian kids enter school without all the skills—assessed under the categories of physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge—to equip them for success.

Historically, Canada's strategy has been to give some families vouchers, cash, or tax deductions to offset their child care costs, a reward that can be meted out over an election cycle rather than the dedicated investment required to roll out a national plan. We've come close. In 2004, Paul Martin's Liberal government committed \$1 billion per year to establishing a national child care program. Ken Dryden, then minister of social development, set up agreements with every province. But the headway Martin made evaporated in 2006, when his government lost power and Stephen Harper eliminated the agreements as one of his Conservative government's first acts of power.

Instead, Harper's Universal Child Care Benefit sent monthly \$100 cheques to parents of children under six years old in order to provide "choice in child care." Critics have pointed out that this approach simply props up a flawed system: the number of licensed child care spaces has not risen significantly since the Harper years, and costs have continued to soar under this paradigm. In 2019, the Daggitt family received monthly \$227 Canada Child Benefit cheques from Trudeau's Liberal government, about enough to pay a nanny in Vancouver for a mere fourteen hours of work or to barely dent the \$1,400 per month daycare costs, assuming they could secure a spot. "So I can afford slightly nicer diapers," Patrick jokes. "It's not enough to hire any type of care or make the existing options affordable." We invest readily in the education of our young, from kindergarten

**"If what you want to do is to build a strong economy, you cannot afford not to have a strong child care program."**

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through to high school graduation and even university. But, for some reason, the most promising and vulnerable of our citizens, those under the age of five, are treated like consumer decisions their parents made instead of like citizens in their own right.

For half a century, numerous government reports and panels have concluded the same thing: invest in a national, universal child care program and you advance the nation. “In the time between then and now, I’d say the most significant thing is that other countries have really developed their programs and we haven’t,” says Martha Friendly, executive director of Toronto’s Childcare Resource and Research Unit. “We’re a serious outlier.” Sweden, Denmark, and Slovenia have all invested in universal child care. In its report card on early learning and care, the United Nations Children’s Fund found that Canada met only one out of ten benchmarks that ensure children get a good start in life, landing it in last place (with Ireland) out of twenty-five wealthy countries.

According to a growing body of academic research and economic studies, investing in early learning and care programs grows your economy, decreases the gender pay gap, helps single parents return to work and get off social assistance, and lifts families out of poverty. As an investment, universal child care has higher rates of return than dollars invested in primary, secondary, or post-secondary education. Some research suggests children who have access to early learning programs go on to be more educated, hold better jobs, earn more, and have better health. Incredibly, the initiative can also pay for itself.

In Quebec, the only province or territory with a universal child care program, which it launched in 1997, the increase in GDP from more mothers working—together with concomitant increases in tax revenues, reductions in social assistance recipients, and lower child benefits—has meant that government expenditures on child care haven’t cost taxpayers a single dollar. For every dollar invested in a national child care program, there is an estimated

\$6 return—more for children from low income families. Quebec’s program is the envy of many parents around the country because of its affordability: a sliding scale of about \$8.05 to \$21.95 per day, based on family income. The initiative emerged from a push to support women returning to work after maternity leave, and arguably, it has been a success in that regard: the province enjoys a higher female labour-force participation rate than Ontario does. But the Centres de la petite enfance, child care facilities that offer sought-after, high-quality care, do not have nearly enough space to meet Quebec’s demand, so admission is lottery based. For those left out, the province subsidizes private daycares and in-home daycares. This has garnered criticism in Quebec, and it can serve well as a cautionary tale. Quality is paramount, otherwise governments can wind up subsidizing child care that gets parents back to work but fails to maximize the potential of its wards.

**E**ARLY IN THE PANDEMIC, policy makers and governments quickly realized that to have essential workers working, their children needed looking after. Grandparents, long valued as a crutch for Canadian families on this front, were no longer a safe option given their higher risks from COVID-19. Canadian families had been limping along with tenuous child care arrangements already; the pandemic laid those arrangements to waste. “All of the problems with the child care sector—the problems of access, the problems of affordability, the problems of reliability, the problems of child care not being there when people need it—those of course predate the pandemic,” says Ballantyne. “But what the pandemic did was make all those problems so visible to so many more people.”

In this context, the Trudeau government naming a Canada-wide early learning and child care system as part of four foundations of its approach to the pandemic seemed inevitable. Advocates await the creation of the promised federal child care secretariat, who will lay the groundwork for a national

system. Politically, the parties are divided. NDP leader Jagmeet Singh says the federal government needs to invest \$10 billion over the next four years for universal child care, while Conservative leader Erin O’Toole has promised to boost child care benefits to families instead.

As for the Daggitts, Jenny is currently nearing the end of her second maternity leave and gearing up to return to night shifts so she can watch their now two kids during the day while Patrick works nine to five. I, too, like countless other parents, often find myself juggling. Which is how I ended up in the surreal situation of discussing Canada’s child care crisis with Paul Martin one morning, before the pandemic, when, lacking child care myself, I plopped my daughter in front of the TV to buy the time I needed. I was eager to discover what had made him the prime minister who came closest to achieving what others—Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney, Jean Chrétien—had talked about but never delivered. “I think that this idea of saying . . . that a government can’t afford it is just absolute nonsense,” Martin told me. “The fact is, if what you want to do is to build a strong economy, you cannot afford *not* to have a strong child care and early learning program. . . . And I’ll take on any right-wing economist in the world on this issue as to whether or not this is money that is well spent. The fact is, it has one of the highest returns on investment of any government program.” As I listened to Martin expound on the value of nurturing young minds by providing them with the best education possible through early learning and child care, I looked over to see my then three-year-old daughter practically licking the TV screen in rapture. “Do I believe that this is a moral issue? Unequivocally,” Martin continued. “There can be no excuse for not giving our children every opportunity that is possible.” ➔

.....  
**ANNE SHIBATA CASSELMAN** has written for *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, and *Maclean’s*. She lives in Vancouver.



## LOOKING AHEAD

# Serenity

*In 2021, we can dream of gathering without fear*

BY BLACKPOWERBARBIE

MY HOPES FOR 2021 are lofty. I want to visit a water park with my loved ones. I want to share space with strangers whose proximity I'm not gravely afraid of. I want to stand in a long line and laugh moistly over funnel cake. I want to float on the lazy river in the beating heat, unbothered by whose child might be peeing in the water because we're all there to relax and have a good time together. ☞

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## POLITICS

# Northern Inroads

*While Canada ignores the Arctic's economic potential, China is poised to invest*

BY GLORIA DICKIE

ILLUSTRATION BY MIN GYO CHUNG



**T**HE VAST mineral deposits of zinc and copper near Izok Lake, in the Northwest Territories, lay glittering but ultimately un-touchable until August 2019, when transport minister Marc Garneau pledged \$21.5 million in federal funding toward the first phase of development for the Grays Bay Road and Port Project, a transportation network designed to cash in on the opening of the Arctic. This money would add to the \$40 million allocated to building a series of roads across the Nunavut–Northwest Territories border, which will help connect Izok Lake to the

deepwater port at Nunavut's Grays Bay, located along the increasingly ice-free Northwest Passage sea route that leads to Asia.

In 2011, MMG Limited, a multinational mining corporation, expressed interest in building a road to open up some of the Arctic's remote but lucrative mineral reserves. Standing to benefit most from this would be the corporation's primary shareholder: the Chinese government. The tremendous cost of the road and port, however, ultimately made the project economically unviable for MMG, which halted further development,

in 2013, in hopes that Canada would pick up the shovel. "On behalf of MMG, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Canadian government for their support and funding," CEO Geoffrey Gao said in a press release following Garneau's pledge. "Road and port access is the key to unlocking the Izok Corridor."

For Stanley Anablak, president of the Kitikmeot Inuit Association, an organization that represents Inuit in western Nunavut, it mattered not whether investment came from Canada or from abroad. Investment had been held back largely by limited backbone infrastructure in the territories. More roads and ports, better broadband networks and transmission lines, and even railways, Anablak notes, could change that. "Without this project, we will continue to be dependent on the [few] mines that can operate completely independent of regional infrastructure," he wrote in an email. "We want to be more self-sufficient. We need to be in charge of our own destiny."

With the entire transportation network project bearing a \$1.6 billion price tag, the \$61.5 million in Canadian funding seemed a drop in the bucket, but it is what that money represents that concerns Michael Byers, a Canada Research Chair in global politics and international law at the University of British Columbia who has monitored the development for years. "I don't see a need for us to be subsidizing Chinese investments in the Canadian Arctic," he says. He believes economic benefits to Inuit communities are oversold. "[The road] has one purpose, which is to support mineral development in the region... and the primary commercial beneficiary will be a Chinese company."

There is growing concern that China's influence in the North could threaten Canada's autonomy in the region and put politicians in uncomfortable situations as they weigh national regulations with foreign-policy strategies. Canada has spent decades ignoring its Arctic potential and, as a result, the region's economy lags far behind that of most

other northern regions around the world. Evidently, the Canadian Arctic has not proved such a blind spot for China.

**C**HINA'S GROWING INTEREST in the Canadian Arctic, one of the least defended regions on earth, has been a calculated move. In 2013, despite not being one of the eight Arctic nations, China gained official observer status at the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum, and later declared itself a "near-Arctic state"—a phrase that seems to ignore the 5,000 kilometres between its northernmost point and the Arctic Circle. The Chinese government has focused largely on the Russian and European Arctic, but in its scramble for resources and transportation domination, that is beginning to change. In Greenland, for example, as the ice sheet recedes, precious metals, gemstones, rare earth elements, and uranium are suddenly becoming accessible. China now controls over 90 percent of the global trade of rare earth minerals, according to a report from the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, and a Chinese company is forging ahead with a mine at the world's second-largest rare earth element deposit, in Greenland. "A big reason the Canadian North trails the Russian Arctic, and even Greenland, in resource extraction and development is that it's just so hard to get in there, build things, and get the product out to market," explains Adam Lajeunesse, a researcher in Canadian Arctic marine-security policy at St. Francis Xavier University.

Forty percent of Canada lies in the Arctic—an area with abundant deposits of oil, gas, and minerals. And Chinese companies have already helped finance the Nunavik nickel mine and Lac Otelnuik iron project in the sub-Arctic of northern Quebec. Lajeunesse says that Chinese investment in the Arctic is something he's been anticipating. And the country's advance toward the Arctic Circle will likely be aided by warming

temperatures. In 2017, the icebreaker *Xuelong*, or Snow Dragon, made its first voyage through the Northwest Passage, which Canada recognizes as internal waters. The United States has long contested Canada's sovereignty here, but as Lajeunesse explains, "China's position on the Northwest Passage is purposefully ambiguous." And, while the Chinese government has said it respects Canadian sovereignty in the region, it plans to freely use the transit passages. Arguing against Canadian sovereignty, Lajeunesse says, would make operating in the Canadian North more difficult; this way, China reserves the right to challenge Canada's claim during future diplomatic negotiations. Given the dangers of operating in undercharted waters, foreign nations must rely on the support of the Canadian Coast Guard to ensure safe shipping. Sea ice, storms, and icebergs could all spell disaster.

China is already a key supporter of the Northern Sea Route, the once frozen shipping lane opening up above Russia that's expected to shave as much as two weeks off transit times between Europe and Asia. And, at the mouth of the Yangtze River in Shanghai's Jiangnan Shipyard, Chinese and Finnish architects recently finished construction on the nation's second heavy icebreaker. Closing bids for a third, China will soon have more heavy icebreakers than most of the actual Arctic nations. In 2018, the country released its first Arctic policy paper, laying out plans for a "Polar Silk Road"—an Arctic extension of its infamous transportation megaproject, the Belt and Road Initiative, which currently spans more than 130 countries. The paper focused on China's altruistic aims: the Chinese government hoped to understand the Arctic through research, protect it against climate change, and promote peace. But the paper also stated plans to extract resources and participate in the Arctic's governance. Where does that leave Canada, the nation with

the second-largest share of the Arctic, behind Russia?

The Canadian government has been slow to wake up to China's Arctic ambitions. "We've not been paying attention, both defensively and opportunistically, to the Arctic," says Irvin Studin, president of the Institute for 21st Century Questions. Rather, we've focused solely on relations with our neighbouring global powerhouse. It wasn't until April 2019 that the House of Commons updated its report on Canada's Arctic sovereignty, which recommended that the country "should engage with the Government of China to understand their growing interest in the Arctic." Engaging with China, however, has proved difficult. With the 2018 arrest and attempted extradition of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, whatever goodwill existed between the two countries vanished. Soon afterward, China detained two Canadians, including a diplomat. (China denies this was retaliation.)

Despite a tense moment in the history of China-Canada relations, Byers says there is zero potential for militarized conflict with China in Canada's North. Rather, China's Arctic interests will take the form of strategic investment and acquisitions. In 2013, China acquired Nexen, a Calgary-based oil-and-gas company, in a \$15.1 billion deal that essentially transferred a portion of Alberta's oil-sands wealth to China. "China is very good at diversifying," says Petra Dolata, a former University of Calgary Canada Research Chair in the history of energy. "Some Chinese academics talk about the Arctic region as possibly the second Middle East."

Currently, there's no offshore oil-and-gas drilling in the Canadian Arctic: a five-year moratorium between the US and Canada blocked the issuance of any new licences in the Arctic Ocean. But that agreement is up for review in 2021. In the interim, China is focusing on its mining portfolio.

This May, the country entered a bid to purchase struggling mining company TMAC Resources, which operates the Doris North gold mine, in Hope Bay, Nunavut. The company's shareholders

**"Some Chinese academics talk about the Arctic region as possibly the second Middle East."**


later voted in favour of the company's sale to Shandong Gold Mining, a state-owned enterprise and the second-largest gold-mining company in China. This upset Yellowknife North MLA Rylund Johnson. "China is writing the cheques now and the government of Canada is not," he says. "Canada is not willing to give Indigenous people in the North enough money to survive. They're not willing to build the necessary infrastructure. When China shows up, people here don't have a choice.... We're losing out on Arctic sovereignty." He's fearful of a future when the Canadian government has to regulate foreign-owned enterprises or dole out punishments following an industrial disaster in the Arctic. "I don't want to have to pass laws thinking, 'Is this going to anger the Chinese government?'"

**C**HINA'S EMERGENCE as a major player in the Canadian Arctic doesn't alarm everyone. Speaking at a 2019 conference on Arctic affairs, then Northwest Territories premier Bob McLeod addressed the room: "Iqaluit to

Oslo is 3,900 kilometres, compared to almost 6,000 from Toronto. And a 10,500 kilometre flight from Toronto to Beijing would be reduced to 6,600 kilometres from Inuvik." The message was clear: Canada's North was far more aligned with certain major global trading blocs than the rest of the country was. China was an opportunity, not a threat.

Indeed, many see China's interest as a pathway for Indigenous people in the North to gain more control over their economic futures. "If you are serious about Indigenous agency," says the University of Calgary's Dolata, "then some of those communities will say, 'If the Chinese want to work with us, bring infrastructure here, we will happily do this.'" It has happened in Greenland, where Inuit groups have aligned themselves with Chinese investors instead of with Copenhagen. Now, it's happening across Canada's Arctic regions. "The Kitikmeot region has enjoyed a reputation of being open to business," Kitikmeot Inuit Association president Stanley Anablak notes. "But being open does not mean being naive or soft." Any

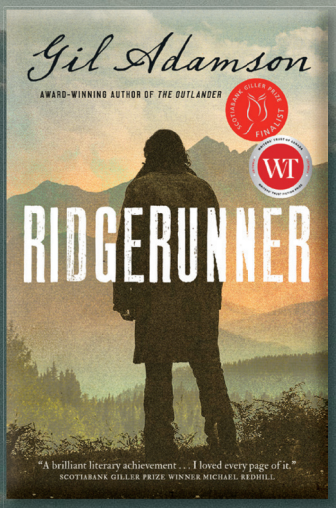
Arctic investor, he explains, must adhere to not only Canada's and Nunavut's laws but also Inuit protections of the land. "The Kitikmeot regions compete with many other international mining districts for this investment. We are open to receiving investment whether it is from Canadian or foreign companies."

Though the prime minister's attention may be focused elsewhere, northern actors have been paying close attention to Chinese developments in the Arctic and weighing how they might realize the region's economic potential. "We have two new borders this century," says Irvin Studin. "One is the Arctic border that's melting. And we have a western border with China. For over 150 years of Canadian existence, China was a destabilized former empire. Now, it's got its act together." 

.....  
**GLORIA DICKIE** has written for the *New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *The Atlantic*, and the *Guardian*. In 2018, she was named a National Geographic Explorer.

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## MEDICINE

# Return of the Anti-Vaxers

*To those who think vaccines are harmful, COVID-19 is just another conspiracy*

BY PAUL GALLANT

ILLUSTRATION BY SPENCER FLOCK

**T**HE WOMAN who organized Vancouver's anti-lockdown protests in April wasn't worried about catching COVID-19 from the small group that attended. That's because Susan Standfield doesn't think the virus is deadly for the average person. She holds this belief despite the fact that, by the day of her third protest, more than 150,000 people had died of the disease worldwide, eighty-six of them in British Columbia.

She says it's a fabricated pandemic "that's really orchestrated, in large part, by the pharmaceutical industry. The money that's going to be made off this corona vaccine is going to be unbelievable." Indeed, more than 200 vaccine candidates are now in development, produced by labs all over the world at a cost of billions of dollars. A fifty-two-year-old mother of two unvaccinated children, ages seven and nine, Standfield describes herself as a human rights activist and content producer. Her husband works in hotel finance. She says her family is struggling financially, which she blames on the government's lockdown measures. A graduate of Queen's University, where



she studied political science, she's been researching vaccines and Big Pharma for about two-and-a-half years and doesn't trust any of the companies, much less any vaccine they produce, to protect people's health.

"I'm not saying that there's a whole bunch of vaccine shareholders sitting in a room wearing spooky costumes trying to kill people. It's not like that. It's just faulty, negligent industry practices," she tells me. Billionaire Bill Gates, whose Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has invested in vaccines for numerous illnesses, has—Standfield continues—helped orchestrate the misinformation and may

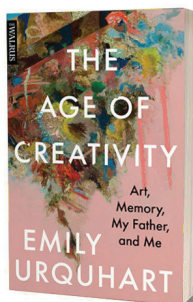
find himself indicted for crimes against humanity. Vaccine companies are unregulated. When a COVID-19 vaccine comes to market, it could kill millions of people. Her claims are a lot to swallow and fit into her larger world view and beliefs about the human body free of medical interference. "The one thing the industry never talks about is the power of the body that is in perfect health," Standfield says. "That body would be able to fight off infections because it has strong natural immunity."

While surveys suggest most Canadians eagerly await a cure for COVID-19, anti-vaxers—or "vaccine-choice advocates," as they like to call themselves—have been doubling down on the paranoid rhetoric and conspiracy theories on Facebook pages and other social media. But the battleground is not just online. On July 6, 2020, Vaccine Choice Canada, one of Canada's most prominent anti-vax groups, was among several plaintiffs that filed a legal action in the Ontario Superior Court against the Canadian government, among others, for its "draconian and unjustifiable measures taken in response to COVID-19." The lawsuit not

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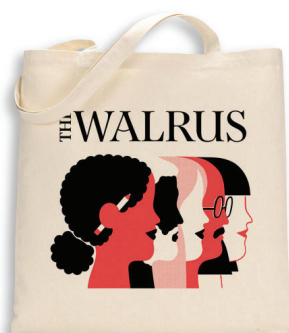
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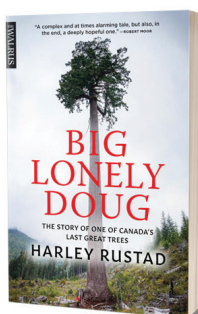
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 **CANADA'S  
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only targets physical-distancing strategies—which have reduced the spread of the virus—but also promulgates the dangers of rushing a mandatory vaccine to market. “We want to have an evidence-based discussion in a court of law,” says Vaccine Choice Canada president Ted Kuntz.

Anti-vaxers have a knack for holding on to their beliefs no matter what inconvenient facts come along. The community is small—according to some estimates, only 1 to 3 percent of Canadians are hard-core supporters—but it can be very vocal and is organized enough to cause angst for public health officials. With the UK’s Center for Countering Digital Hate reporting that the largest 147 anti-vax social media accounts they investigated had a total of over 49 million followers—up 7.8 million since the start of the pandemic—it’s no surprise the World Health Organization considers “vaccine hesitancy” a top threat to global health. If too few people get vaccinated for COVID-19, we fail to reach herd immunity, putting those who can’t be effectively protected, like the

immunocompromised and those with preexisting conditions, at risk.

Timothy Caulfield, a professor in the University of Alberta’s faculty of law and school of public health, says vaccine skeptics are capitalizing on the distrust toward pharmaceutical companies and the confusion around COVID-19 to spur worries about side effects. Caulfield fears the messaging is working. “We’re seeing skepticism for a vaccine that isn’t even here yet.” In April, 73 percent of Canadians surveyed by Impact Canada, a federally funded research initiative, agreed with the statement, “If a safe COVID-19 vaccine becomes available / recommended, I would get it.” Months later, when the same statement asked about an “available” vaccine, only 65 percent agreed. A recent pair of surveys by Angus Reid found more troubling numbers. In July, 46 percent of Canadians wanted to be the first to get vaccinated. Two months later, that dropped to 39 percent.

Successful prevention of disease and death can be self-defeating, in a way, because we rarely see what was prevented

and so are less likely to fear it. We may even doubt the threat was real—doubts that create room for medical half-truths to take hold. COVID-19 may be one of the most terrifying diseases we currently face. It’s also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for anti-vaxers to spread their message.

**S**MALLPOX, which killed as many as 30 percent of those it infected, was last seen in Canada in 1962. Diphtheria—a disease that kills approximately one in ten people who get it—went from 9,057 cases in 1924 to zero by 1996. That’s largely due to inoculation. Over the course of the last century, vaccines have dramatically curtailed child sickness and death. From 1926 to 2011, the death rate of children between the ages of one and four dropped 98 percent.

That kind of success story has little effect on Gloria Dignazio, a Winnipeg mother who believes vaccines do more harm than good. After her daughter Sara was born, in 1992, the family took her for standard vaccines, some of which were followed by her daughter crying

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and screaming. Sara was eventually diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. At age twenty-eight, Dignazio's daughter is still nonverbal and lives in a special-needs group home. "I feel she's still suffering to this day because of the vaccinations," she said. And Dignazio is not alone. Kuntz, Vaccine Choice Canada's president, had a child with a lifetime of untreatable seizures that the family blames on childhood vaccines. His son, Joshua, died in 2017, at age thirty-two.

Correlation does not imply causation, but that's not how the heart works. "Sometimes, it comes down to a bad experience that they've had, usually with the health care system, that wasn't dealt with," says Julie Bettinger, a vaccine-safety scientist at the BC Children's Hospital. "Once that mistrust is there, it's very difficult to counter."

The human brain is prone to particular kinds of errors in judgment. Personal experience and anecdotes usually affect us more than scientific data does. When we form a belief, we tend to take notice of information that confirms it and dismiss information that unsettles it. "We are not good at dealing with uncertainty, and this is a particular challenge with new vaccines and new diseases," says Devon Greyson, an assistant professor of health communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

With so many approaches to developing a COVID-19 vaccine—in labs big and small, corporate and academic—public health advocates are concerned that, if the vaccines that come to market are perceived as anything less than silver bullets, vaccine refusers will win converts. In the 1950s, a contaminated batch of a newly minted polio vaccine led to cases of permanent paralysis and death. Decades later, it can still come up in conversations with vaccine skeptics despite how much vaccine safety has improved since then. That obsession with failure threatens vaccine acceptance more broadly, but it's particularly worrisome

for governments that are depending on mainstream uptake of a COVID-19 vaccine to get our lives back to normal. Unfortunately, no medical intervention is risk free.

"None of these vaccines will be given approval for use in Canada without scrutiny, and I mean deep scrutiny," says Noni MacDonald, a professor of pediatrics at Dalhousie University. Although the federal government aims to bring COVID-19 vaccines to market as quickly as possible, the Canadian guidelines for clinical trials, the most time-consuming

part of the approval process, are still very strict. "But none of these vaccines, just like most new drugs, will have been done on millions of people. There will be rare and very rare side effects that we didn't know anything about in a pre-licensure trial."

The possible imperfection of a COVID-19 vaccine is a red flag for refusers. "If you want to get it, go ahead, you get it," says Dignazio. "But, when you have a reaction, there's going to be nobody there to help you." While vaccine refusers come from all walks of life—from the well educated and affluent to blue-collar libertarians—many share an obsessive faith in self-reliance, in finding answers outside of conventional channels. "Don't rely on somebody with a PhD," says Patrick Allard, a contractor and real estate investor who helped organize protests against the government's COVID-19 measures in Winnipeg last spring. Allard, thirty-nine, claims he "almost died" from a vaccine he received at eighteen months, and this belief became part of his world view, magnifying the appeal of breaking off from experts and charting his own course. "Everything known to man is accessible on the internet." That also includes what's out of date, what we're learning at this very minute, and of course, what's completely fabricated.

Hard-core skeptics, like Allard and Standfield, insist they are open to new information. But it's hard to imagine

them ever changing their minds about vaccines. "There's no way you can inject anything in the body and promise people they'll be 100 percent safe," says Standfield. "As soon as you enter the skin, there's harm."

Others might experience a foxhole conversion only when sickness and death affect someone in their own circle. "When you personalize a disease so there's reality to it, it very much changes your perception about how serious that disease is, because it's not just chatter," says MacDonald.

When it comes to false claims, the countermove is to either confront or crack down. Facebook has banned ads discouraging vaccination, YouTube has pledged to remove videos with misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines, and Pinterest's policy is to direct any vaccine-related search by its 300 million users to reputable health organizations. Meanwhile, companies and governments are bracing for pushback from antivaccination groups as they rush to approve COVID-19 vaccines and rollout strategies.

But, as the Vaccine Choice Canada lawsuit demonstrates, vaccine opponents have changed up their tactics, moving from warning about drug safety to adopting a "civil liberty" argument. This suggests that aggressive policies, such as mandatory vaccinations, could backfire. There's a fine line between leaving a skeptic to stew in their erroneous beliefs and riling them up to the point of redoubling their efforts to win others over. The Canadian Paediatric Society has suggested that stricter vaccine requirements for school enrolment, for example, could inadvertently "feed into rights-based objections in anti-immunization campaigns, both in print and across social media."

Earning public trust may simply require that Canada's health care system do its job well: put out an effective vaccine, communicate clearly, and hope good sense prevails. ✚

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**PAUL GALLANT** is a Toronto-based journalist who writes about social change, business, urban development, and travel.

**Vaccine refusers come from all walks of life — from the well educated and affluent to blue-collar libertarians.**





## The Gender Equity Marathon

As we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the report by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, **SARAH BOESVELD** reflects on its significance and notes that, when it comes to gender equity, the struggle continues

**O**n December 7, 1970, a report was tabled in the House of Commons that the media called “a bomb, already primed and ticking.”

The 488-page document was loaded with research and insights that would prove very dangerous indeed—a threat to a Canada in which men blindly benefited from the unpaid labour of their wives at home, a society in which legal restrictions kept women from enjoying their recently enshrined human rights.

These pages contained big ideas. Big plans. A looming seismic shift. But the report by the Royal Commission on the

Status of Women in Canada, tabled fifty years ago this month, was no bomb. It was more of a starting pistol for the second leg of a marathon in pursuit of gender equality that was already revolutionizing the Western world in a post-war era. And it’s an endurance run we are still slogging away on half a century later.

This was the first sociocultural gut check of half the population, a group of people ignored by public policy since, well, forever. It was the first blueprint for how to tackle Canada’s gender inequality on a national scale. The report argued for women’s right to respect and identity beyond the home,

as well as equal pay and opportunity at work. It pressed for reforms to outmoded tax, marriage, and divorce laws and called for urgent changes to the Criminal Code and immigration laws. It had radical-for-its-time solutions to labour market inequality, like creating national child care infrastructure. Yes, that yet-to-materialize idea is more than fifty years old.

Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson established the commission in 1967, but he doesn’t deserve credit for it. Women made it happen. By 1966, they had organized to push for women’s rights to be recognized as human rights. That November, the



### BIBIANE COURTOIS

Nurse Bibiane Courtois has adapted health programs to fit the needs of Indigenous communities, and spent years as president of Quebec Native Women, where she supported the amendment of the Indian Act under Bill C-31. She has continued her advocacy as the commissioner on the Quebec Human Rights Commission and a member of the Status of Women Council of Quebec.

Committee for the Equality of Women in Canada (CEWC) filed a brief with the federal government, pressing them to take action. When it was ignored, activist and CEWC leader Laura Sabia “impulsively” told a reporter she’d send 2 million women to Parliament Hill to protest, writes media historian and Carleton University journalism professor Barbara M. Freeman in her book *The Satellite Sex: The Media and Women’s Issues in English Canada, 1966-1971*. “If we have to use violence,” Sabia said back then, “damn it, we will.”

That wasn’t necessary. By early 1967, the prime minister appointed journalist and broadcaster Florence Bird to lead a commission that would dig deep into the lives of Canadian women and report back with ideas for how to reduce gender inequality. On February 3 of that year, the panel of five white women and two white men set out on their quest.

The commission focused on women’s equal opportunity with men and was less interested in tearing down systems that were built to be stacked against women, says Joan Sangster, a Canadian women’s and labour historian and Trent University gender and women’s studies professor.

Over more than six months, the commission solicited almost 470 briefs and about 1,000 letters of opinion from Canadian women. They held hearings in fourteen cities across Canada’s ten provinces and in the North and heard from nearly 900 witnesses. They also fielded lots of critique, says Sangster. “The report was assailed by left-wing women. They thought it ignored structural economic inequalities—especially [those created by] capitalism.”

Women of colour spoke up, too: Black activist and journalist Carrie Best, in an unofficial capacity, called out the commission for ignoring the fundamental issues facing Black and Indigenous women,

says Freeman. Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) activist Mary Two-Axe Earley advocated for changes to the Indian Act, which robbed a woman of her status if she married a man without Indian status. To Malinda Smith, a political scientist and the University of Calgary’s vice provost of equity, diversity, and inclusion, the Canadian status of women report—and others like it—tend to try to hide the country’s racist and colonial history and ongoing discrimination. “By treating all [racialized] women as immigrants, it obscured the complexity of the history, but it also privileged the English and the French.”

There was no visibility of LGBTQ issues, and the report didn’t do much to tackle poverty, either. There was also little mention of violence against women—a matter that was still considered “private” at the time.

Despite these failures and oversights, Freeman calls the report revolutionary for its time. “It was transformative in the sense that a number of its recommendations were taken up and a number of changes were made,” she says.

These changes included better representation of women in government. It led to affirmative action plans that resulted in more women being hired. Many stereotypes disappeared from textbooks disseminated in federal schools covered by the Indian Act—a move that eventually trickled down to the provinces and into broadcasting, says Freeman. In 1971, the federal government introduced a fifteen month limited paid maternity leave at 66 percent of the mother’s most-recent salary. Though it took until 1985, the federal government did finally amend the Indian Act to address gender discrimination. The report also mobilized interest groups motivated to keep the heat on the legislators to enact these changes—one of

the most influential, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, was active from 1971 to the early 2000s. But equality—a.k.a. sameness—is not equity, which is making sure people have what they need to survive and thrive in a system that isn’t designed for all, says Smith. That’s today’s goal. And intersectionality, a concept that emerged in the 1980s to point out privileges and distinct disadvantages as they pertain to sexuality, gender identity, race, age, ability, and class, is now nonnegotiable for a new generation of feminists. The fight for gender equality has now moved beyond the binary.

“Mark Twain said history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes. And we are in a very rhyming moment right now,” says economist Armine Yalnizyan, the current Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers. Between the Women’s March and #MeToo, the revolutionary energy of the late 1960s and early 1970s is rebuilding, Yalnizyan says. Blind spots persist, however, particularly when it comes to the economy. Despite the 1970 report pointing out the inherent value of unpaid labour, she adds, “progress has been conflated with wealth.” The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed this inequality: women are the essential workers, in low-wage service jobs, in the care economy. They’re the ones abandoning careers to homeschool and take care of children, contributing to the biggest drop in women’s labour force participation in more than thirty years. Yet, there’s reason to be hopeful. This fall’s Speech from the Throne promised national child care in its plan for COVID-19 recovery.

We have historic work to build on. In this marathon, it’s safe to say the year of the pandemic, 2020, hit us on all of our weak spots. But it’s in the recovery that we see new opportunities that might just inch us closer to equity after all.



### FARRAH KHAN

For the past two decades, Farrah Khan has advocated for equity and an end to gender-based violence. She was appointed a member of the Gender Equality Advisory Council for the G7 and, in 2018, she addressed world leaders at the G7. Khan mentors at femifesto, a feminist organization that works to shift rape culture to consent culture; with them, she created *Use the Right Words: Media Reporting on Sexual Violence in Canada*, a guide for journalists.

# Gender Equality in Words and Numbers

Voices you should hear and statistics you should know

BY TINA ANSON MINE

**“The fight for women’s rights is an unfinished struggle. We must continue, as long as there are injustices.”**

Huberte Gautreau, gender equity activist and co-founder of New Brunswick’s Crossroads for Women, a house for victims and survivors of domestic violence. (*Acadie Nouvelle*, 2016, translated from French.)

**“Publicly funded child care can...support economic growth by increasing the participation of women in the labour force and expanding the tax base. Child care is not an expense but an investment towards a more gender-balanced, resilient economy.”**

Jasmine R. Rezaee, director of advocacy and communications at YWCA Toronto; Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations coordinator at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care; Abigail Doris, executive director of the Toronto Community for Better Child Care; and Janet Davis, former Toronto city councillor. (*Now Magazine*, 2020.)

**“This time, we’ll leave no woman behind.”**

Zanana Akande, the first Black woman elected to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. (Toronto Women’s March, 2018.)

**“We are a dysfunctional nation because of past oppression. But only we can get ourselves out of our situation. People are still here who can teach us Aboriginal ways. And, while seeking the truth, we must be careful to be respectful of everyone.”**

Gloria May Eshkibok, Two Spirit Indigenous actor, singer, and community activist. (International Women’s Day at York University, March 2000.)

**57**

Canada’s rank among 193 countries around the world in representation of women in national parliament.

**82%**

Percentage of Canadian women aged 25 to 54 who participated in the labour market in 2015, versus just under 22 percent in 1950.

**\$0.87**

The amount earned by women for every \$1 earned by men in 2015, up \$0.10 from 1981.

**78-80**

Projected life expectancy of Indigenous women in Canada in 2017. That’s up to five years less than the general female population.

**30%**

Percentage of Canadian single mothers who are raising their children in poverty.



## JANAYA FUTURE KHAN

Khan inspires the likes of Zendaya and Marc Jacobs with their Sunday Sermons on Instagram Live, which tackle everything from the Black Lives Matter movement (they are the co-founder of Canada’s chapter) to police brutality to queer theory and transfeminism. Khan has found purpose in fighting for the rights of others and working to change societal conditions and attitudes that lead to oppression.

# Status Update

Fifty years after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women made its 167 recommendations, we're zooming in to track progress on five key issues

BY AMY VALM

## Recommendation 8: EQUAL PAY

### 1970

The commission asserts that women have a right to equal pay and that compensation should be determined based on skill level, responsibility, and effort — not gender. Factors like seniority should also be used to help determine the rate of pay.

## Recommendation 17: PARENTAL LEAVE

### 1970

The commission recommends establishing a maternity leave program via the Unemployment Insurance Act so that women who contribute could have access to eighteen weeks of paid leave. The program was launched in 1971, but offered only fifteen weeks.

## Recommendation 76: SEX EDUCATION

### 1970

The commission recommends that all provinces and territories offer proper family life education. This includes sex education for boys and girls, taught in the same classroom starting in kindergarten and continuing throughout elementary and secondary schools.

## Recommendation 106: TREATMENT OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

### 1970

The commission recommends that an Indigenous woman be allowed to keep her legal Indian status if she marries a person without Indian status. It also recommends that she be allowed to pass this status down to her children.

## Recommendation 126: ABORTION

### 1970

The commission recommends that abortions be permitted at the request of any woman who has been pregnant for twelve weeks or less and highlights that a qualified medical practitioner should carry out the procedure. This requires an amendment to the Criminal Code.



### DORIS ANDERSON

As editor-in-chief of *Chatelaine* (1957–1977), Doris Anderson championed equality. She once published a feature on fifty women who would make good parliamentarians — and put twelve of their faces on the cover to encourage women to run for office. This led to a political career and an appointment as chair of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. She later served as president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women.

## 1978

First established in 1978, the Equal Wages Guidelines set a baseline for establishing pay equality. Protected under the Canadian Human Rights Act, the guidelines included skill, responsibility, effort, and working conditions as the measurements to determine value of work.

## 2018

The Government of Canada introduces proactive pay equality legislation. This aims to ensure that federal workers — both men and women in private and public sectors — get equal money for work of equal value.

## 2020

A study finds that, one year after postsecondary graduation, Canadian women will earn 12 percent less than men. Five years after graduation, the gap widens to 25 percent, or almost \$18,000 less.

## 1981

A new standard for maternity benefits is set when Canadian Union Postal Workers go on strike for forty-two days. The victory yields seventeen weeks of federal paid leave and helps catapult the issue into the public eye.

## 2019

Justin Trudeau promises a fifteen week parental leave for adoptive parents as part of his reelection campaign. It is a step in the right direction, but some adoptive parents argue that they need more time to bond with their children than this period allows.

## 2020

New and expectant parents laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic before qualifying for employment insurance benefits are left struggling for benefits. The pandemic-affected school year offers a dilemma for parents as many Canadians — particularly mothers — are forced to choose between their careers and childcare.

## 2015

Ontario implements a new sex education curriculum, its first update since 1998. The revamped syllabus includes same-sex relationships to reflect the legalization of gay marriage in Canada in 2005.

## 2018

Ontario Premier Doug Ford cancels the 2015 sex education curriculum after protests from socially conservative parents. The scrapped curriculum contains age-appropriate teachings on sexual orientation, gender identity, and consent.

## 2019

Action Canada finds that the sex education being offered in Canadian schools — which varies by province and territory — is “sub-standard, outdated, inconsistent, and sometimes inaccurate.”

## 1985

After a decades-long campaign helmed by activist Mary Two-Axe Earley, Bill C-31 allows women who had lost their Indian status due to marriage to apply for full restoration of their rights and status. It also gives their children the right to apply for the same.

## 2008

Prime Minister Stephen Harper issues a public apology at the behest of the Government of Canada to Aboriginal Peoples. He acknowledges Canada’s role in the residential school system, that saw generations of children forcibly removed from their families and cultures.

## 2019

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls releases a 1,200-page report that finds that Indigenous girls and women are twelve times more likely to go missing or be murdered than any other demographic in the country.

## 1988

The Supreme Court rules on *R. v. Morgentaler*, which brings the legalization of abortion. The Supreme Court of Canada deems the existing abortion law unconstitutional, stating it violates a woman’s right to “life, liberty and security of the person.”

## 2017

The abortion pill, known as Mifegymiso, is made commercially available, granting greater abortion access to rural areas of the country and easing long wait times. Two years later, in 2019, Health Canada rules that women no longer require an ultrasound to be prescribed the pill.

## 2020

Abortion remains a contentious topic, especially in New Brunswick, where the provincial government will not cover abortions performed outside of hospitals. The province’s only remaining abortion clinic faces closure and makes national headlines.



### FLORENCE BIRD

After spending most of her career covering women’s rights, international affairs, and pay inequity for the CBC, Florence Bird served as chair of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (1967–1970). She went on to be appointed a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1971 and served as a senator until her seventy-fifth birthday.

# Mapping a Path to Equity

Change takes time — and nowhere more than in the fight for gender equity. Get to know the players and the events that lead to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women and their historic report

BY REBECCA GAO



**1893**

The federal advocacy group National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) forms in 1893 with the goal of becoming a “parliament of women.” It lays the groundwork for the formation of other women’s rights groups well into the twentieth century.



**1929**

The Persons case is successfully appealed, establishing women as “persons” under the law. This means they can no longer be denied the same rights as men and can work for reforms within the federal government.



**1961**

On December 14, the President’s Commission on the Status of Women is created in the United States and chaired by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt until her death in 1962.

Its report, *American Women*, is released on October 11, 1963, and recommends substantial reforms that inspire activists in the Canadian women’s movement.



**1963**

Judy LaMarsh becomes minister of national health and welfare. She is the second female cabinet minister in Canadian history and the sole woman in Lester B. Pearson’s cabinet. She immediately alerts the prime minister to the need for a federal public inquiry similar to the American one.



**1966**

On April 18, the president of the Canadian Federation of University Women, Laura Sabia, sends a letter to women’s organizations across Canada inviting them to a meeting to examine the status of women.



**1966**

On May 3, thirty-two women’s organizations send fifty representatives to Sabia’s meeting in Toronto. They form the Committee on the Equality of Women in Canada (CEW), and pressure the federal government to launch a commission.

PHOTOS: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA/TOPLEY STUDIOS (NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN GROUP AT RIDEAU HALL); LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA/NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA (UNVEILING OF A PLAQUE COMMEMORATING THE FIVE ALBERTA WOMEN WHOSE PETITION LED TO THE PERSONS CASE); LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA/LESTER B. PEARSON (LESTER B. PEARSON); JUDY LAMARSH (JUDY LAMARSH); LAURA SABI (LAURA SABI); DOMINION-WIDE PHOTOGRAPHS LIMITED (ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN); LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA/DUNCAN CAMERON (LESTER B. PEARSON); H. ARMSTRONG ROBERTS/CLASSICSTOCK (1960S TWO WOMEN TALKING)



## 1966

On November 10, CEW presents the government with a brief demanding the appointment of a royal commission. With support from LaMarsh, who continues to pressure the prime minister, the CEW's demands are met, and the government agrees to launch a formal inquiry.



## 1967

Pearson establishes the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada "to inquire into and report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps might be taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society".



## 1968

The commission begins their work, holding public hearings across the country. They distribute brochures in supermarkets and libraries, and hold the events at times and in locations that are accessible for women. At the hearings, nearly 900 witnesses give testimony.



## 1970

The *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* is tabled in Parliament on December 7. Its 167 recommendations tackle a wide range of issues, including pay equity, maternity leave, child care, birth control, abortion rights, and equal access to education.



## 1971

The CEW takes a new name, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, and resolves to hold the government accountable for following through on the report's recommendations.



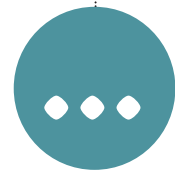
## 1971

The Office of the Coordinator, Status of Women — as well as a corresponding cabinet position — is created. It becomes a federal departmental agency in 1976. In December 2018, the federal government's Department for Women and Gender Equality is established.



## 1973

Provinces and territories begin to create their own advisory bodies on women's issues, modelled on the federal office. Every province currently has a minister responsible for the status of women.



## 1980s

Many of the report's recommendations are either partially or fully carried out by this decade's end. Despite this progress, however, significant problems identified by the report still have not been resolved. Advocacy efforts continue, as certain crucial recommendations have yet to be implemented in 2020.

## Still Unnamed

The report by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was a major milestone for gender equality in Canada, but it failed to address the LGBTQ community. **SARAH RATCHFORD** explains that while we've come a long way in recognizing gender nonconforming folks, there's more work to be done

“She’s trying to check in!” the receptionist at the Halifax doctor’s office hollered to a colleague as I approached the desk for my appointment. Despite the walls being covered with signs about how the clinic respected queer folks and their pronouns, I had been immediately misgendered. This happens everywhere. I’m nonbinary, or enby, but I was assigned female at birth. I’m usually not asked about my pronouns. Most people, by default, assume that I identify as a woman. Some of my friends struggled with my pronoun shift from she to they, and most of my family members chose to disregard it.

While people in my personal life have had trouble with my identity, Canada as a country is doing a slightly better job making the jump from a binary view of gender to a more multifaceted one. Status of Women Canada, in becoming a recognized government department, has changed its name to the Department for Women and Gender Equality (WAGE). Transgender people are now protected under Canadian human rights law. We can have an X on our passports to indicate that we don’t identify as male or female and, for the first time, Statistics Canada is going to start counting us in its next census.

This is progress, considering that the report published by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada didn’t include anything about LGBTQ people, who also face serious gender inequality and many of the same issues the report identified as affecting cisgender women. But a closer look reveals that not enough has changed in fifty years. In the official announcement on its creation in 2018, WAGE announced that it had “an expanded mandate for gender equality that includes

sexual orientation, gender identity and expression”, but it didn’t name trans and gender nonconforming people outright. This is a problem because much of the inner pain trans people experience stems from the constant erasure they face. Failure to explicitly identify and include queer, trans, gender non-conforming, two-spirit, nonbinary, and genderfluid



It’s critical to include trans and gender nonconforming people in discussions about gender equality.

people in national discussions of gender equity and status leads to continued violence against these communities. The exclusion perpetuates the very gender-based othering the department purports to be fighting against.

It’s crucial to include us in order to keep us alive and well. Due to continued erasure and discrimination, trans people face high rates of poverty and violence. Canada is only just beginning to include trans and nonbinary people in its data collection,

and trans people are often misgendered in death, so we don’t know how many trans people have been murdered. Globally, however, we know that at least 331 trans and gender nonconforming people were murdered in 2019 alone.

Trans people are also at a higher risk of suicide than cisgender people: in 2015, more than 10 percent of trans people reported attempting suicide. Up to 43 percent of trans people have attempted it at some point in their lives.

Trans, nonbinary, and two-spirit people across Canada, though, have long been fighting for safety and recognition. Sustained community activism has pushed us to the point we’re at now, where federal changes have been implemented. Groups like Egale and The 519 in Toronto demand better policy, awareness, and community protection. Powerful individuals like Monica Forrester, who does outreach with Maggie’s Toronto Sex Workers Action Project, and Susan Gapka, a trans rights activist and educator, speak out about the same issues. We gather to hold trans marches across the country. Within our communities, we spend a lot of time caring for one another.

Change is needed on a wider scale, though. As we mark the anniversary of the historic report on the status of women, I think it’s time to start talking about a new status report, this time led by queer and gender diverse people. We deserve the opportunity to spell out our needs and find ways to work toward a future where we can be seen and supported. When people and institutions talk about gender equality and stop at men and women, they’ve lost the plot. Trans and gender nonconforming people have to be explicitly included. Our lives depend on it. ■





## LOOKING AHEAD

# Home

*In 2021, we'll pay more attention to the land*

BY JONATHAN DYCK

I GREW UP in southern Manitoba, and all I saw in front of me was gridded farmland. But spending so much time close to home is changing the way I think about the Prairies. I've hiked old trails, visited ghost towns, and learned about the trading sites that shaped this area before the Canadian government sent in its survey crews. I'm noticing the variations across farmers' fields beyond their respective crops: the covered-over creek beds, the persistent patches of forest and scrub. And I've been bringing along my binoculars to keep track of the birds. I'm looking forward to my first full year of migration cycles. 🍂

## ECONOMICS

# How to Save the Middle Class

*Today's vision of the good life is rooted in twentieth-century ideals. It's time to reinvent it*

BY MAX FAWCETT

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HOLLY STAPLETON

IN 1939, the Westinghouse Electric Corporation commissioned a fifty-five-minute film about the Middletons, a fictional Indiana family who travel to the New York World's Fair, where they are dazzled by the company's futuristic vision of "a new Tomorrow." It's a consumer paradise that includes everything from television to a photoelectric bike called the Phantocycle to a towering voice-controlled robot named Elektro. The movie's highlight is a staged dishwashing competition between "Mrs. Modern," who is armed with a new Westinghouse dishwasher, and "Mrs. Drudge," who works furiously at a sink. To no one's surprise, the gleaming labour-saving device wins.

The contest was more than smart product placement. It presaged the postwar financial boom that ushered in the dramatic expansion of the middle class. Indeed, the ideals of prosperity and success that shape much of how we still understand the middle class can be traced largely to this period, often referred to as the golden age of capitalism. From 1950 to the early 1970s, governments across the Western world managed to both build their economies and strengthen the social safety nets that underpinned those economies. Incomes rose, households grew wealthier, and values like thrift and sacrifice, which had guided previous generations, were replaced with indulgence as consumers coveted the ever-widening array of household items and goods that flooded the market. According to Frederick Elkin's





1971 book, *The Family in Canada*, Procter and Gamble reported in 1957 that more than half of its sales volume came from products that hadn't existed at the end of the Second World War. By 1963, 94 percent of Canadian households sported refrigerators, 87 percent used electric washing machines, and 90 percent gathered in front of television sets that hawked drinks, instant rice, and toys. The Middletons had become a reality.

If you showed someone from the late 1950s the typical Middleton life today, they would probably think society had made extraordinary economic advances. How else could someone middle class afford a beautiful car, an enormous new house (relative to what was normal, say, seventy years ago), and access to the kind of food and wine once the exclusive preserve of royalty and the very rich? But they would miss what lies under the surface of that abundance: ever-churning anxiety. It seems almost unthinkable today, but for a time, the middle-class dream was attainable with just one good income (as well as the support of unpaid homemakers, something the pandemic has brought back into the discussion). While the average middle-class family in 2020 may have more in the way of consumer opportunities, the cost goes well beyond the sticker price on any given item. To afford it, people have to work longer and harder than they did before. They're more alienated from their communities, more distant from their families, and more nervous about their futures—which are increasingly paid for by money they've borrowed.

By the beginning of 2020, the average Canadian household owed \$1.77 for every dollar of after-tax income, a combined total of more than \$2.3 trillion. That number is largely a by-product of paying down mortgages, but it's also a reflection of our new national pastime: living beyond our means. With the majority of middle-income households seeing little change in their annual incomes between 1981 and 2011, families have needed to go deeper into hock to enjoy the trappings of an existence their parents and grandparents were able to afford without overextending themselves. Even before COVID-19 crashed the economy, Canadian households were dedicating nearly 15 percent of their spending to servicing debt, a level not seen even in the United States at the peak of its 2007 housing bubble. If interest rates rise, or if runaway housing markets correct themselves, overleveraged families will be in deep trouble. According to a recent Ipsos poll conducted for insolvency firm MNP, almost a third of Canadians can't pay their bills without sinking deeper into debt, with another 21 percent admitting they are \$200 or less away from insolvency at month's end.

The question is whether the middle class, at least in how we've come to understand it, will go extinct. If wages stay stagnant, many Canadians will have no choice but to postpone or cancel investments in their homes, in their children's education funds, and in their retirement plans. Meanwhile, the pace of technological change will keep upending entire industries, reminding everyone that steady career paths are a thing of the past, along with the healthy pensions they used to produce. "For the better part of the postwar era," writes former CIBC economist

Jeff Rubin in *The Expendables*, his recent book about globalization's effect on Canada's declining living standards, "membership in the middle class was for life. Today, staying in the club is a lot harder." Indeed, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) made a key finding in a 2019 report: just under 70 percent of baby boomers were middle class in their twenties and thirties, but only about 60 percent of millennials achieved the same status. Generation Z is almost certain to have even fewer people meet the standard.

Yet, despite the considerable hurdles—housing costs, stagnant incomes, massive debt loads—the standard still beckons. No wonder: unlike the concept of upper or lower class, the connotations associated with the middle class are almost entirely positive. In our ever more polarized society, it remains a shared identity both aspirational and uncontroversial. Members of the middle class are celebrated as hard-working citizens who want what's best for kin and community and are therefore engines of both progress and stability. "Societies with a strong middle class," writes OECD chief of staff Gabriela Ramos in her foreword to the report, "have lower crime rates, they enjoy higher levels of trust and life satisfaction." The middle class, in a sense, is the immune system of modern democratic societies: weakening it weakens us all.

That may explain why the federal government thought it a good idea to appoint a minister of middle-class prosperity in 2019. In her mandate letter, Mona Fortier was asked to lead efforts to "better incorporate quality of life measurements into government decision-making and budgeting." But, with the pandemic now throwing both that decision making and budgeting into complete disarray, the future of the middle class—and the over 1 million debt-laden Canadians who have suddenly lost their income—is looking more precarious than ever.

While politicians will be busy tripping over one another in the months to come, frantic to restore the glory of everyone's favourite socioeconomic demographic, the current moment gives us a rare opportunity to reassess what it is we should

be trying to restore and how we ought to do it. The preferred option has often seemed like a return to the past—making the middle class great again, as it were. The solutions commonly discussed involve either generating more income (by signing new trade deals or cutting taxes) or redistributing the income we already have (by raising taxes on the rich and investing in new programs, like child care).

But maybe a more lasting solution lies in strategic retreat: embracing the fact that this past can't be recreated and that we may not want to even if it could. Consumerism helped build the vision of middle-class prosperity that prevailed in the latter half of the twentieth century, but it also heaped the middle class with household debt, which got it into serious trouble. Most importantly, while consumption is a big part of the picture, the middle class is being routed by forces much bigger than the average household.

What we need is an idea of the middle class that aligns with the technological, social, and financial realities of our time. This means understanding that we don't all have to live in major cities or near our workplaces anymore: as the pandemic has shown, technology can make it possible to move from places that are overpriced or overcrowded. It means understanding that atomized households can lead to fragile family structures and that we may need to extend our sense of community by welcoming different generations into the same spaces, which will not only stretch our money further but also leave us more connected. And it means understanding that current generations will likely live longer than any in history and should plan accordingly. It also means confronting the fragmented nature of the gig economy and the rise of precarious employment.

These are problems that require policies that take us in fresh, unprecedented directions. Instead of trying to help more people get into the old version of the middle class, a version underwritten by social and economic conditions no longer replicable or desirable, we should focus our collective energy on building an entirely new one. It's high time we gave the Middletons a makeover.

FIRST, we need to understand who we're making over. The OECD defines the middle class as those earning between 75 and 200 percent of the median income, which, for a family of four in Canada, puts the range between approximately \$65,242 and \$173,980. But defining the middle class by income quickly runs into trouble because there's no consensus on where to draw the line. The Pew Research Center says it's between 67 and 200 percent. Some economists prefer 50 to 150 percent, others 75 to 125 percent.

The middle class's inherently amorphous nature allows nearly everyone to imagine themselves either as members of its ranks or as people on their way to getting there. Politicians are of little help because they have a vested interest in making the concept as open ended as possible. When pressed in the House of Commons in 2020, Fortier admitted she had no "statistical measure" of the group she was supposed to be helping.

But, if there's one thread that ties together the various definitions of the middle class, it's the group's role in the creation of a consumer-oriented economy. In 2017, then finance minister Bill Morneau classified such Canadians, in part, by the "lifestyle they aspire to." Undeterred by stalled wages and rising costs, the drive to maintain that lifestyle has remained undiminished, with middle-income households now accounting for almost two-thirds of total spending on consumer goods in OECD countries. The holy grail of that lifestyle is also the most expensive part: the single-family home. Pursuit of home ownership at nearly all costs defined the middle class in the postwar years. Spurred on by government programs that promoted the aspiration and by a culture that valorized it, young families struck out for their own pieces of the white-picket-fence dream. From the 1940s to the 1960s, home ownership in the US spiked from 43.6 to 61.9 percent. That figure was even higher in Canada, where, according to the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, it reached 66 percent in 1961. The residential industrial complex also put tens of thousands of tradespeople to work, building garages that

needed to be filled with new cars and modern kitchens that needed the latest appliances and fixtures.

Today, the trajectory established in the postwar period has remained intact. After plateauing between 1981 and 2001, home ownership rates in Canada resumed their upward march, topping out, in 2011, at nearly 70 percent. They ticked down to 67.8 percent in 2016, but a recent Scotiabank survey reports a surge of interest in pandemic homebuying as rates have crashed and people have sought more space to manage the challenge of working from home. At some point, however, home ownership appears to have been transformed from a utilitarian objective to a social marker of prosperity and success. Television networks like HGTV have fed the fantasy of couples with middle-income jobs buying, flipping, renovating, or otherwise trading in seven-figure homes, and banks and other lenders have been mostly happy to go along with it.

In elevating the cultural importance of the owned home, the middle class has allowed other priorities to get usurped. A house, after all, means you're shackled to a mortgage, which in turn constrains other financial choices. You can't save as much. You can't afford as many kids as you may have wanted. You can't send them to the college or university you hoped for. Owning a house also shackles you to a location, which constrains your flexibility: namely, the ability to quickly and effectively adapt to changing circumstances, like unemployment or disability. In our increasingly disruptive—and disrupted—economy, that's a dangerous place to be.

It's also a familiar one for the middle class. After all, its lack of resilience was first highlighted when the conditions that drove its expansion in North America started to fall apart in the mid-1970s. Among the most significant setbacks occurred when Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries punished the US and any Western allies that supported Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War by refusing to sell them oil. By the following year, the price of crude jumped about 400 percent,

and the surge helped kick off a bout of stagflation—a lethal mix of economic stagnation, runaway inflation, and high unemployment—that undermined the generous incomes and benefits that had fed middle-class prosperity. The results of that are stark: after growing at a rate of 2.6 percent per year between 1947 and 1973, according to the Economic Policy Institute, hourly wages have struggled to keep up with inflation ever since.

annual income were almost exclusively those already in the top 10 percent—and especially the top 1 percent. “Fans of globalization have always had good news to share,” writes Rubin. “But there is no such thing as a free lunch. Someone is picking up the bill, and it could very well be you.”

That financial pain, however, wasn't entirely apparent at the time. Instead, it was masked by a rise in two-income



The tipping point took a bit longer to arrive in Canada, but by the early 1980s, the trend was clear. Yes, the economy grew, but the spoils were distributed far less equitably. As governments embraced globalization and its growing network of trade agreements, the middle class paid the highest price. Economic activity was increasingly outsourced to lower-wage jurisdictions, and good manufacturing jobs disappeared—and, with them, the ability of labour to negotiate better pay. The households that saw gains in their

households—a trend that made it seem, from roughly 1975 to 1990, like things were still getting better for middle-class families. But, while there was more income, nearly everything cost a lot more. Some American families spent that additional salary on competition for educational opportunities, either in the form of expensive homes in desirable school districts or tuition at better universities. In Canada, tuition fees were lower than in the US, but middle-income families still spent a growing portion

of their household budgets on education, housing, and child care. Without the ability to add an extra income in times of hardship—as the one-income households that defined the 1950s and 1960s could—and with those higher fixed costs eating away at their ability to save money, two-income households were more vulnerable to economic shocks than the middle-class families that preceded them had been.

COVID-19 is the most recent of those shocks. It may prove the most devastating. Right now, thanks to the more than \$125 billion that the federal government has provided in direct payments to individuals and in wage subsidies to businesses, many households are treading water. But those waters won't stay calm forever. Financial experts are concerned that, when spending winds down and the bill for those mortgage deferrals comes due, the pandemic's full financial impact will be felt. Many predict a huge wave of insolvencies and bankruptcies.

But, for all of the havoc COVID-19 is creating, the pandemic has also served as an opportunity for Canadians to take stock, both as individuals and as a society. "We don't just see a financial system in crisis," says Yannick Beaudoin, an economist and a director general for the David Suzuki Foundation. "It's *society* that's going through a crisis." That crisis might give us the space we need to imagine both a different kind of middle class and a new set of goals it could work toward.

Beaudoin has already done some of that work in the form of town halls, where he's asked Canadians what the purpose of the economy is and what it should be. "Those answers, 99 percent of the time, are qualities. They're defining prosperity, progress, and well-being in experiential terms—how I feel, the quality of my life, the quality of the education of my children. Nobody ever came up with quantities, like how many dollars I have in my pocket."

**L**AST JUNE, pollster Nik Nanos shared some findings, in the *Globe and Mail*, from a handful of national surveys on how Canadians were feeling, about the pandemic and

the country's future, three months into the lockdown. Only 12 percent believed we would return to a prepandemic normal. Fifty-six percent were in some agreement that "the post pandemic Canada will be united with a common purpose to improve our lives." Those polled pointed to, for example, a growing appreciation for friends and family and an interest in fewer material possessions. "Less of a focus on the self, a yearning for a simpler life and a retreat from consumerism," Nanos wrote, "would be watershed changes."

This shift is easier said than done. It assumes that many chose their prepandemic lives when, in reality, most felt they were just barely getting by. The middle class is carrying a huge burden, one not sufficiently borne by existing social supports. There's no question that smaller homes, less-pricey tastes, and more-modest retirements would put Canada's middle class on a more sustainable trajectory—one not underwritten by massive debt and back-breaking work schedules. But, when the culture pressures us to supersize our lives and everything in them, from our homes to our vehicles, that shift becomes more difficult than it should. Such resets aren't natural in a society hard-wired for growth.

"To suddenly say we're going to focus on well-being instead of growth creates a heart attack for the monetary system," says Edmonton economist Mark Anielski, who published *The Economics of Happiness* in 2007, a book that challenged the conventional understanding of economic prosperity and the measures, like GDP, that track it. In his research, Anielski—who likes to remind people that *wealth* comes from a Middle English word for well-being—has tried to develop financial tools able to account for human values, such as health or happiness. But what Anielski calls "a civilization of love" can be a hard sell to policy makers obsessed with growing the economy as quickly as possible for the good of the country. "That's why there's this constant push to overproduce and overconsume," he says, "because everyone is debt financing their future, whether it's a mortgage or a student loan or a business loan or government

bonds." The rising cost of living—according to a 2019 RBC report, the ongoing expenses of a new home in Vancouver or Toronto would eat up, respectively, 88 and 76 percent of typical household income—underscores that a healthy GDP doesn't mean much if the spoils aren't reaching the people who are helping drive it, and it means even less if that GDP is negatively affecting their future.

Even when consumerism was powering the middle class's growth, and vice versa, there were early doubts about whether this was such a good thing. According to the Pew Research Center, in 1968, three years before the US middle class reached its high-water mark in overall proportion of households, presidential hopeful Bobby Kennedy gave a speech, at the University of Kansas, in which he argued that newer isn't always better. "Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things," he said, referring to the GDP. "It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile." Six years later, speaking in Vancouver, prime minister Pierre Trudeau echoed Kennedy. "Prosperity is the rallying cry of politicians everywhere. But what of happiness?"

The challenge Pierre Trudeau and others like him faced is that there wasn't a politically viable alternative to challenge the flawed logic of economic measures like GDP. As an estimate of the total value of the goods and services a given country produces, GDP is often conflated with the health of the economy. Middle-class spending can have a big effect on the size of that number. But GDP doesn't pay attention to the goods or services being produced or whether they have any intrinsic value to the society in question. It doesn't measure the distribution of economic growth or its impact on communities and households. As far as GDP is concerned, a dollar is a dollar, no matter how it's made or whose pocket it ends up in. As we've seen over the past three decades, however,

not all dollars are created equal—and economic growth doesn't mean nearly as much if that growth finds itself in the bank balances of the wealthy.

There is a better metric we can use to reset our shared understanding of middle-class life: sustainability. A more financially balanced quality of life might take the form of smaller homes and older cars. But it could also mean bigger bank balances and less-strenuous work schedules. Sustainability could also involve recycling and reusing, cutting down on food waste, and biking or taking public transportation—in other words, having a smaller impact on the environment and consuming fewer resources.

Yes, such changes may have downsides. GDP may not grow as fast if the middle class reduces the scale of its desires. In fact, the economy could even shrink. But, perhaps counterintuitively, we could end up emotionally richer, as individuals and as communities. Before we can even get to that point, though, we need to shift the conversation away from what we want and toward why we want it. “How do you distinguish the things you actually aspire to,” Beaudoin asks, “from the belief that the only way to get those things is consumption? It's not something that can happen overnight. But I think a disruption like COVID has opened up the possibility of those conversations.”

**I**F CANADA'S POLITICIANS really want to help restore and rebuild the middle class, they should start by directing their attention toward creating a more fair and just tax system.

Since 1951, when the middle class was entering its best years, taxes on the richest 2 percent in Canada have fallen, while, for the middle class, they've risen. As economist Armine Yalnizyan noted in a 2010 paper, “In 1948, the top marginal tax rate was 80 percent, on taxable incomes over \$250,000.” Today? Nowhere near. “The top tax rate in 2009,”

Yalnizyan writes, “averaged across Canada, was 42.9 percent for incomes above \$126,264.” A 2019 study from the Fraser Institute reaffirmed this reality, noting that the marginal effective tax rate for those earning more than \$150,000 was 41 percent—and just 43 percent for those making more than \$300,000. (This flattening of income-tax rates is hardly unique to Canada. A study released last year found that, in 2018, the richest 400 US families paid a lower effective tax rate—23 percent—than the bottom half of American households did.)

By restoring tax rates on high-income earners to more traditional levels, the federal government would have more revenue at its disposal to fund programs and services that benefit the middle class, such as education and child care—ones that pay out obvious social and economic dividends. It could also use that revenue to keep reducing taxes on middle-class households. To its credit, the federal government has made some progress here. Its middle-class tax cut, implemented in 2016, reduced the rate for people who made between \$45,282 and \$90,563 from 22 to 20.5 percent, and in 2019, it followed that tax cut by tabling legislation that would increase the

basic deduction to \$15,000 by 2023 (and phase that benefit out for those in the top tax brackets). The Canada Child Benefit, which was created in 2015 and combined a bunch of different programs and benefits into one payment, has put thousands of additional dollars in the pockets of parents, depending on their incomes and family sizes.

That said, a new vision of middle-class prosperity is about more than just new tax measures or social programs. It's also about distancing ourselves from the definition of prosperity that got so many households into trouble in the first place. That means, first and foremost, breaking our addiction to home ownership. Starting in the 1960s, the Canada

Mortgage and Housing Corporation played a key role in developing initiatives that didn't require a mortgage. Tracing its roots to the 1940s Wartime Housing Limited, CMHC's mandate is to improve housing conditions in Canada, which has primarily meant supporting the construction of cooperatives and, more recently, helping people get on the property ladder through mortgage insurance. While the federal government's ten-year, \$55 billion National Housing Strategy, announced in 2017, will have CMHC overseeing the construction of 125,000 new housing units, the organization will need to be even more ambitious if it wants to bend the curve here.

The good news is that Evan Siddall, president and CEO of the National Housing Strategy, is willing to be bold. As the *Globe and Mail* reported in 2019, he has called out what he describes as “the glorification of home ownership”—an unusual step for the CEO of a federal housing program that, despite its mandate to reduce homelessness in Canada, seemed, in the recent past, committed to fuelling that glorification. “Renting is a perfect and valid housing option,” Siddall said last year at a *Globe and Mail* event on affordable housing, “and may in fact be the best long-term option for many households.”

This sort of blasphemy hasn't endeared him to Canada's real estate industrial complex—Royal LePage president Phil Soper described his arguments as “bizarre.” But Siddall, whose term ends this year, has become even more outspoken about the risks that first-time homebuyers face and the counterproductive role that banks can play in giving them too much financial rope. He has also steered straight into the morass of NIMBYism, which continues to frustrate efforts to create the kind of density that's needed if we want our cities, as he said in 2019, “to serve as engines of economic growth, innovation, and job creation that benefits all Canadians.” That means looking beyond single-family homes. “Underutilized capacity is inexpensive and readily available.” Options include laneway houses (smaller houses built in the backyards of existing homes), secondary suites, and co-living models.

**A new vision of middle-class prosperity is about more than just new tax measures or social programs.**

# Stichomancy

BY BARDIA SINAE

There is hair, yes  
A fly on the sill

An itch  
beneath the waxy scar

where they tapped  
into a vein  
above my heart

I say to the doctor  
Those phlebotomists  
are all pricks

My timing  
is impeccable

She opens a layer  
between my skin  
and the air

where the spine  
is ridged  
like the edge of a coin

The pain, on a scale  
from one to ten  
is seven

and rising  
A sharp noise  
A bed of ants

Tapping into these sources of underutilized capacity is essential if the middle class is to escape the ever-escalating pressure of trying to afford a home in Canada's major urban centres. But so, too, is examining whether the every-household-for-itself approach that helped build the middle class is now contributing to its decline.

If there's a silver lining to the last decade of precarious employment, tighter household budgets, and soaring real estate prices, it's how these factors have pushed people back together, whether that's toward their genetic families or toward families of their own choosing and creation. This trend, often involving at least three generations living under one roof, has been driven by both adult children returning home (or staying there longer before moving out) and seniors moving in with their kids. But the popularity of such arrangements among Indigenous and immigrant families is also helping to drive up their number. The last census, in 2016, revealed that 2.2 million Canadians were living in a multigenerational setup, which was itself a 37.5 percent increase since 2001, making them the country's fastest-growing housing category. The highest share of such housing is in real estate hot zones Toronto and Vancouver (5.8 and 4.8 percent, respectively).

All of this was in play before COVID-19, but our pandemic era will likely accelerate the trend because of both its economic upside—sharing mortgages, taxes, and utilities—and the reminder it has given us about the importance of being closer to family and friends. In a March 2020 story for *The Atlantic*, David Brooks argued that idealizing the nuclear family as the perfect household unit has been nothing short of a disaster, leaving many lonelier and with weaker support systems. He makes the case that we need to return to “big, interconnected, and extended families” and the values that informed them. “For decades, we have been eating at smaller and smaller tables, with fewer and fewer kin. It's time to find ways to bring back the big tables.”

We also need to reexamine the size and scope of the table we all eat at—

and what's being served. Rather than budgeting on the basis of fiscal deficits and surpluses, some governments, like New Zealand's, Scotland's, and Iceland's, are incorporating social and cultural balance sheets into their decisions. In May 2019, prime minister Jacinda Ardern's government tabled New Zealand's first well-being-based budget, which was guided by priorities like aiding the transition to a low-emissions economy, lifting the incomes of Māori and Pacific Islanders, and reducing child poverty. It also invested \$1.9 billion (NZ) in new funding for mental health, including nearly half a billion for the so-called missing middle: the wider population experiencing mental distress that misses out on care in a system focused on the most severe needs. “We're embedding that notion of making decisions that aren't just about growth for growth's sake but how are our people faring,” Ardern said at the time. “These are the measures that will give us a true measure of our success.”

The government here hasn't taken these sorts of steps yet, but maybe the mandate letter for the minister of middle-class prosperity suggests that we aren't that far behind. Mona Fortier has kept busy holding a series of town halls on the government's financial response to the pandemic, and her mandate's promise to incorporate “quality of life” metrics into the budget process may be helping to inform the progressive choices the government has made since COVID-19—especially its willingness to err on the side of spending more rather than less. “If we can all agree that something's wrong,” Beaudoin says, “and we can all agree on a path toward making it right, there's no impediment to us making it happen—at any scale.”

For the twenty-first century's answer to the Middletons, this would be a long-overdue reckoning. Their predecessors were won over by a vision of limitless opportunity. But that was then: clinging to the past is no way to build a future. 🏠

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**MAX FAWCETT** is a former editor of *Alberta Oil* and *Vancouver* magazines.



# The Latest Read from The Walrus Books

## THE AGE OF CREATIVITY

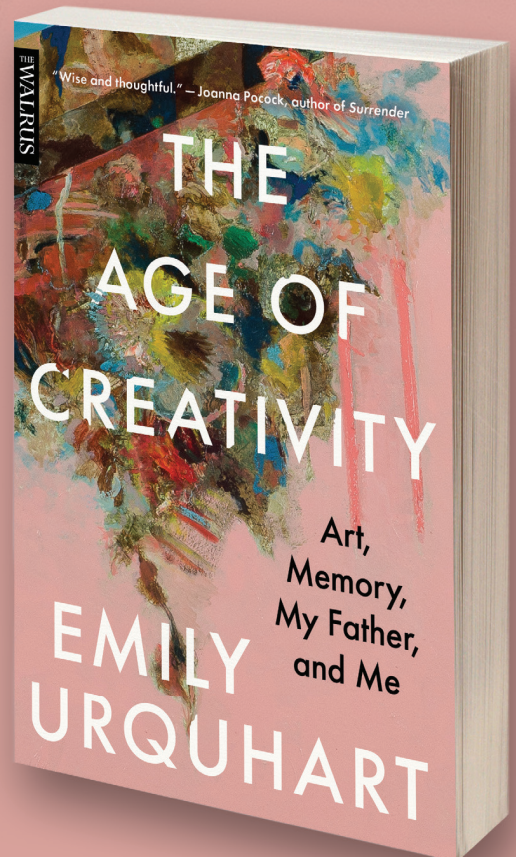
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THE O'HAGAN ESSAY ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS

# The Myth of Universal Health Care

*Two physicians on what it would take for Canada's health care system to deliver on its promises*

BY NADINE CARON AND DANIELLE MARTIN  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETE RYAN

**E**RYN DIXON had enough to manage as it was. At the age of forty-five, with profound disabilities related to multiple sclerosis, Dixon was living in Almonte Country Haven, a long-term care facility on a grassy hill in eastern Ontario. Then, in March, she contracted COVID-19. As she lay unconscious and unresponsive, struggling on oxygen, her father, Rick, was told to say his final good-byes. Against the odds, Dixon pulled through, but more than a third of her facility's residents weren't so lucky.

Hers is just one of so many stories that we have been reading and watching and hearing for months—a catalogue of media reports every day, documenting COVID-19's progression through our communities and the various ways it takes its toll.

On May 4, Karam Singh Punian, age fifty-nine, did die of COVID-19. He was one of an estimated twenty Toronto airport taxi drivers who contracted the virus that month alone. Most of the 1,500 people who make their living driving passengers to and from Toronto Pearson International Airport are self-employed men who are newcomers to Canada. They work long hours in sedentary jobs and eat on the go, without access to health benefits or paid sick days.

In early August, Patrice Bernadel, a much-loved Montreal pastry chef, suffered from COVID-19 in a different way. Like so many people in the restaurant industry, Bernadel had seen his business devastated by the pandemic. And, like so many self-employed Canadians, he had no guaranteed access to mental health services outside his doctor's office or the emergency department. "The economic, social and psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have destabilized his life to the point of diving him into a deep depression, preventing him from seeing the light at the end of the tunnel," his brother wrote in a Facebook post soon after Bernadel died by suicide.

As COVID-19 took hold around the world in the spring, Canada prepared for one very specific kind of tragedy: the kind we saw unfold in Italy and in New York, one where hospitals were overwhelmed and ventilators in short supply. Thanks to good timing, hard work, and an economic shutdown that will have ripple effects for years, we have so far avoided that particular calamity. But, as Dixon's, Punian's, and Bernadel's stories reveal, there are many kinds of tragedies: as a country, we were too slow to realize that there were—and are—other pandemic disasters happening all around us. The stories of COVID-19-affected Canadians are also stories about Canada and our health care systems—about which kinds of tragedies we go to great lengths to avoid and which we allow to persist.

By comparison with the death count unfolding south of our border, many Canadians have felt very proud of how our country and its health systems—thirteen provincial and territorial systems, with some areas of federal responsibility as

well—rose to meet the initial crisis of the pandemic. Canadian medicare has always meant more than a set of public insurance programs: we are prouder of it than we are of ice hockey or the maple leaf. The notion that access to health care should be based on need, not ability to pay, is a defining Canadian value, surviving along the longest shared border in the world with the country that hosts the most expensive, inequitable, profit-driven alternative imaginable. That difference in values is often emphasized in our political rhetoric, as when Jean Chrétien would say, “Down there, they check your wallet before they check your pulse.”

We are two doctors working in very different environments and very different medical disciplines, and we have been seeing COVID-19 reinforce some basic lessons about Canada’s health care. First, our systems’ preexisting cracks become chasms when subjected to major shocks. Second, a conversation about health care that is divorced from the social factors that help determine how healthy you are is not really a meaningful conversation at all. And, third, perhaps the only lesson that should qualify as news: when they feel they have no alternative and the need is sufficiently great, governments, private-sector players, and individual people can make tremendous changes in very short order.

**H**EALTH CARE SYSTEMS exist to prevent and treat illness. What this means, as a matter of medical practice and health policy, is a matter of enormous ongoing debate. When Tommy Douglas implemented public health insurance in 1947, his Saskatchewan government focused first on covering hospitals and later on medical care—at that time mainly defined as physician services. This model spread across the country in the decades that followed, with the support of the federal government and its spending power.

Canada does a reasonably good job on these basics. Despite unevenness and variability, our national performance on a wide range of health indicators is generally strong. A person diagnosed with leukemia, for example, is less likely to

die in Canada than in Ireland, Sweden, or France, the 2016 Global Burden of Disease Study found. Similarly, someone who experiences a stroke in Canada is likely to have a better outcome than is someone in the US, South Korea, or Singapore.

Just about any Canadian will tell you that the Achilles heel of our health care system—what is sometimes characterized as the price of these basics—is the wait time to get access to nonurgent care. It isn’t the kind of delay imagined by some American conservatives, in which “socialized health care” leaves people to exsanguinate on the sidewalk while they’re told to take a number. Rather, it’s the senior who, in line for a hip replacement, loses the chance to dance at her granddaughter’s wedding; the small-town teacher with chronic headaches waiting months for an outpatient neurology appointment; the parents, worried about their daughter’s shift in eating habits, recognizing that it will take months to get an eating-disorder assessment.

In the “new normal” of COVID-19, that problem is worse. Public health efforts to quell the spread of the coronavirus have been admirable and necessary, and the sacrifices within the health care system—delayed operations, cancelled clinic visits, postponed diagnostic testing—to prepare for a potential onslaught of cases were likely unavoidable. But the toll is steep and ongoing. Tens of thousands of cancelled procedures need to be rescheduled while hospitals grapple with a new reality that is much less efficient than the pre-COVID-19 world was. It is no longer prudent to have four patients in a single hospital room, let alone people on gurneys in the hallways; PPE must be conserved, so cases continue to be prioritized based on clinical factors; physical distancing must be respected. The high-volume churn of operating rooms for surgical cases is a thing of the past; everything just takes longer.

There are other layers of service, unattended to during the first wave, that may declare their impacts in the coming months and years. In primary care, immunizations were delayed, diabetes management put on hold, and routine

visits for diseases like schizophrenia or high blood pressure forgone. In Manitoba, there was a 25 percent drop in administered measles, mumps, and rubella vaccines between March and April for children two and under, the *National Post* reported. Meanwhile, BC Cancer, a wing of the province’s health authority, estimates that, in the first six weeks after the pandemic was declared, almost 250 British Columbians unknowingly had silent cancers go undiagnosed as their screening mammograms, colonoscopies, and pap smears were cancelled.

And all that is still just the basics. Douglas dreamed of moving to a second stage of medicare, in which coverage would be much broader and the prevention of disease a bigger focus. That dream was never realized, and there are whole swaths of health care that are not included in our universal system at all. Instead, an ongoing emphasis on doctors and hospitals has led many observers to characterize Canada’s so-called universal health care coverage as “narrow and deep.” What we do provide (services like primary and specialty medical care, diagnostics, surgery) tends to be high quality; our health care system strives for equal access to care particularly by ensuring there are no financial charges for these services. If you are seen by a doctor or admitted to the hospital, if you need a CT scan or a blood test, if you require a biopsy or a specialist assessment, you will be well taken care of and never see a bill. But, if you are among the 20 percent of Canadians lacking adequate drug coverage and you walk out of your doctor’s office with a prescription for medication to treat your diabetes or high blood pressure or infection or depression, you may be on your own. If you require therapy with a psychologist for anxiety, or physiotherapy for your sports injury, or a root canal, your access will depend on your ability to pay.

#### THE COST OF CUTTING CORNERS

**D**EBATES ABOUT expanding our public health care plans to include medications, mental health care, home care, and a host of other medical services—and to move beyond treatment into true prevention—are

as old as the plans themselves. Out-of-pocket health care spending (what you reach into your wallet to pay for, whether the full cost of a service or the co-payment or deductible) accounts for roughly 14 percent of total health care expenditures. Private insurance, often provided through our workplaces, accounts for another 12 percent. Of course, some of this is discretionary health spending (the massage you enjoy but that isn't medically necessary, or that second pair of eye glasses you get because they look cooler than your old ones do), but reliance on private spending and employment-dependent insurance is still higher in Canada than in most high-income nations.

When one includes both public and private spending, health care amounts to 10.7 percent of our GDP, which is in the top third of OECD nations. But our government spending is actually lower than most of our comparator nations'. While 70 percent of health care spending is public in Canada, that number is 82 percent in the Netherlands, 77 percent in the UK, and 79 percent in New Zealand. Each of those countries' universal health care systems includes both coverage of prescription medications with just nominal user fees and some degree of mental health care.

Canada has long had the dubious distinction of being the only country in the world with universal health care that doesn't include prescription drugs. We also have less public coverage of home care, dental care, and non-physician care outside hospitals—which includes services provided by everyone from social workers to psychologists and physiotherapists—than most comparator nations. For example, New Zealand's publicly funded system includes long-term care, mental health care, physical therapy, and prescription drugs in addition to hospital and physician care. In Germany, mental health care, dental care, optometry, and prescription drugs are all covered by mandatory universal health insurance.

While some public coverage for these services exists for some people in Canada, the amount differs by province and territory, and many people fall through

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the cracks. The result is that, in our purportedly universal system, many Canadians go without necessary services if they don't have private insurance coverage, usually through their employers. And Douglas's vision of a social democratic society that would take the broadest approach to alleviating the root causes of ill health—which include poverty, racism, and lack of education—has not dominated the political discourse for generations. Canada has moved so slowly on the journey to expand and improve medicare that it has been accused of a “paradigm freeze”—stuck in a system just good

enough to prevent any major change or improvement from ever occurring.

Indeed, current interest in COVID-19 treatments offers up a potential irony for Canada. If the efforts of the international research community yield a treatment—a tablet or liquid that could be taken to prevent hospitalization or a ventilator—millions among us would have no coverage for it. “During the H1N1 influenza, [several provincial governments] announced that the antiviral medication Tamiflu would be available free of cost to anyone who needed it,” says Irfan Dhalla, a vice-president at Unity Health Toronto and a practising

physician at St. Michael's Hospital. "A similar approach might occur should a COVID-19 treatment become available. However, this equitable approach [raises] the question: Why should one prescription medication be available to all based on need and not others?"

In June 2019, then minister of health Ginette Petitpas Taylor tabled the final report of the Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare. The report provided a blueprint for the stepwise implementation of a pharmacare program, developed in partnership with provinces and territories. In the context of a global pandemic, that partially shelved blueprint needs to be dusted off in a hurry.

**I**F PRESCRIPTION DRUG coverage is one urgent and obvious area of expansion, mental health care is another. In 2019, the Public Health Agency of Canada found that 2.5 percent of respondents described having suicidal thoughts within the previous year. By May 2020, in the thick of the pandemic's first wave, a survey found that number had more than doubled. Over and above the disruption experienced by all Canadians when the economy shut down, some people—including parents, people with preexisting mental illnesses, Indigenous people, those with a disability, and those who identify as LGBTQ—faced an increased risk of serious mental illness and suicide.

This is the curve after the curve: the increasing mental health toll of economic devastation, social isolation, and mounting uncertainty that follows on the heels of our commendable collective efforts to squelch the spread of COVID-19. On average, about 4,000 people in Canada die by suicide each year. A recent study suggested that, as a consequence of COVID-19's impact on employment alone, that number could go up by more than 25 percent in both 2020 and 2021. By comparison, in the first ten months of 2020, just over 10,000 people had died in Canada as a result of the disease itself. "After a disaster, population rates of psychological distress tend to double or triple," the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* reported in July.

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**Proposals for health care reform date back to long before the pandemic, but it took the pandemic to get action on implementing even some of them.**



Expanding publicly funded pharmacare and mental health care—moving closer to the promise of “universal” care—could be achieved through a variety of means, the easiest of which is generally understood to be a transfer of federal dollars to the provinces and territories to support part of the cost of such services, on the condition that they be provided free of charge to everyone already eligible for general health coverage. In other words, it would look exactly like medicare does right now, and your health card would be all you need.

Canadians are already paying for these services, whether indirectly, by financing their workplace or private insurance coverage, or directly, by paying out of pocket for them. Each year, Canadians spend almost a billion dollars on mental health counselling, with 30 percent of that coming out of pocket. In the case of prescription drugs, we pay among the highest prices in the world because we don't negotiate centrally. The report on the implementation of pharmacare put the price tag at \$3.5 billion to launch a national program in 2022, with savings of \$350 per year for the average family.

We are also collectively, out of the public purse, currently paying the downstream costs of having a segment of the population that can't afford such services and is forced to suffer the consequences. Removing out-of-pocket costs for medications used to treat diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and chronic respiratory conditions alone would result in 220,000 fewer emergency-room visits and 90,000 fewer hospital stays annually, that same pharmacare report found. This would yield \$1.2 billion a year in health care savings, just for those three common diseases. Similar results exist for mental health services. A 2017 study found that every dollar spent on publicly funded psychological services for depression would save Canada's health system two dollars. Treating health conditions before they escalate and require hospital care improves medical outcomes, preserves quality of life, and saves money that could help offset the costs of program expansion.

#### UNIVERSAL FOR WHOM?

**I**N THE FIRST WAVE of the pandemic, 81 percent of Canada's COVID-19-related deaths were in long-term care (LTC) facilities. Our country was among the worst of all developed nations in preventing COVID-19 deaths in settings like the one where Eryn Dixon lived. A report from the Canadian Institute for Health Information concluded that countries with centralized regulation and organization of LTC, and those that implemented strict guidelines to prevent transmission of the virus at the same time as their lockdowns, fared best. In some parts of Canada, that didn't happen until it was well past too late. Though some nonprofits fared badly and some for-profits did well, on average, the problem was worse in for-profit facilities, which had larger and more deadly COVID-19 outbreaks than their nonprofit counterparts did. The resulting headlines were scathing: "Majority of region's long-term care deaths occurred in for-profit homes"; "Four out of five COVID-19 deaths have been linked to seniors' homes. That says a lot about how Canada regards its elders."

Well over 200,000 Canadians live in nursing homes or long-term care facilities. You know them; so do we. They are our parents living with dementia and frailty. Disproportionately, they are our mothers and grandmothers, the matriarchs of our families. On average, they are over eighty-five and face multiple health challenges, from chronic lung and heart disease to mobility issues to memory loss.

Many Canadians are placed in LTC sooner than they and their families would like—and prematurely exposed to the accompanying risks of living in a congregate setting—because they cannot access the supports and services they need at home or in their communities. And, no matter when a loved one is moved to such a facility, we should be able to expect some consistency in the quality of care they will receive. But, for many years in Canada, quality-of-care indicators, like worsening symptoms of depression or increasing pain, have varied significantly between homes, and worse outcomes have long been documented in for-profit settings in both Ontario and BC, including a higher risk of death. This is at least in part because staffing levels tend to be lower in for-profit facilities. In addition, personal support workers (PSWs), nurses, and other LTC staff are among the lowest-paid and most insecure workers in our health care systems. Many fell ill with COVID-19 themselves and, in some tragic cases, unknowingly transmitted the virus across facilities where they worked multiple part-time jobs.

COVID-19 "gives us an opportunity to reimagine LTC," says Margaret McGregor, a family physician and a clinical associate professor at UBC medical school. "It's time to change the staffing model in LTC so that PSW ratios of one worker to ten to fifteen residents are reduced to one worker to four to seven residents. This allows staff the time to provide holistic relational care. Much like daycare, these ratios should be funded, mandated, and enforced. More importantly, there is evidence that relational care, allowing staff the time to both care for and get to know their residents, improves seniors' quality of life while improving PSWs' conditions of work."

**A**N EVEN MORE uncomfortable truth: health outcomes in Canada are very contingent on who we are and where we live. Race and class figure heavily in the COVID-19 story because they figure heavily in all health outcomes in Canada. Neighbourhoods in Toronto with the lowest incomes, highest rates of unemployment, and highest concentrations of newcomers consistently had twice the number of COVID-19 cases and more than twice the rate of hospital admissions than those at the top end of Toronto's income spectrum did. People experiencing homelessness, seasonal agricultural workers, and those living in congregate settings (everything from rooming houses to prisons) were suddenly acutely aware that their proximity to others put them directly in harm's way.

"Our initial response was focused on flattening the curve, not who was under the curve," says Kwame McKenzie, an expert on the social causes of illness and the CEO of the Wellesley Institute. "But what is really worrying about these analyses is that they were predictable." As of mid-September, the rate of those testing positive was 79 people per 100,000 for the white population. It was nearly seven times that for Black residents (547 per 100,000) and more than eight times that for Latin American Torontonians (643 per 100,000).

We've long known that race, newcomer status, and income drive health outcomes. For example, Canadians of South Asian origin are three times more likely than the rest of the Canadian population is to develop type-two diabetes, and they have a higher risk of dying from cardiovascular disease. We also know that not everyone accesses health care services equitably. Research from Ontario and BC shows that women who are new to Canada are less likely to have their breast cancer captured through screening, and wait longer to be diagnosed, compared with Canadian-born women. First Nations people in BC have well documented but poorly understood increased incidence and decreased survival for colorectal cancer compared with the rest of British Columbians.

But there is still so much we don't know when it comes to how racism and bias affect both health and health care: most provinces and territories do not collect data about Indigeneity, race, or ethnicity in the health care system, so we lack the evidence we need to improve health equity. One crucial example: the COVID-19 rates of the 56 percent of First Nations people who live off-reserve are reflected only in the general-population statistics.

Urban communities are not the only ones left behind: as the second wave of the pandemic crests in many parts of the country, rural and Northern communities have struggled and will continue to struggle to access COVID-19 care, as they face challenges to access health care at all times. The concern about access to specialists and critical-care resources such as ventilators is of course most pronounced in such locations, where sometimes there are simply none within hundreds of kilometres. Prior to the pandemic, First Nations people, Métis people, and Inuit living in rural and remote areas already faced long waitlists for specialist care and a shortage of available health practitioners, often delaying diagnoses and disrupting continuity of care. The distrust Indigenous peoples have in our health care system is informed by historical experiences in residential schools, Indian hospitals, and tuberculosis sanatoriums; it continues to be eroded by present-day racism. Hospital protocols limiting or eliminating family visits, while understandable efforts to reduce rates of COVID-19, may have perpetuated barriers for Indigenous people, many of whom feel unsafe when alone in health care institutions because of our country's history and ongoing discrimination. One needs only to watch the video of Joyce Echaquan's final moments to understand why. COVID-19 has exacerbated wait times for all Canadians, but where access was already poor or nonexistent, the burden is heaviest.

Five years ago, Canada accepted the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report; in 2016, the country became a full supporter, without qualification, of the UN Declaration

on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Despite these steps, disparities in the health and wellness of Indigenous people in Canada compared with that of non-Indigenous Canadians persist and, in some ways, are worsening. Poverty, crowded housing, unemployment, decreases to both quantity and quality of educational opportunities, struggles for food security, and diminished access to Indigenous languages, cultures, and traditional, unceded land—and the deep resilience and capacity that persist despite these impacts of colonization—all determine wellness and downstream health outcomes. Layered on top of these are the all-too-familiar elevated rates of trauma, suicide, addiction, and chronic diseases such as diabetes, autoimmune disease, and cancers—the root causes of which are all embedded in historical and current government policies.

But let's take a closer look. First Nations individuals living on reserves were thought to be sitting ducks for a COVID-19 outbreak: many reserves are located in rural, remote, and Northern areas, have decreased access to culturally safe medical care, and have minimal or no local access to the type of medical care acute COVID-19 patients may need. Yet these "high risk" communities did not fare as predicted in the first wave. Indeed, the percentage of First Nations individuals living on reserve who reported positive for COVID-19 by the end of July was one-quarter that of the general population, and the fatality rate only one-fifth. So far, Inuit communities have been largely spared from the pandemic as well. How?

Many First Nations across the country closed their communities to outsiders in wave one by exercising sovereignty over their land and self-governance. Also key: the respect and priority naturally evident in First Nations communities for their Elders and knowledge holders, and their cultural reliance on the land. First Nations' connection to the land has always been a vital part of their resilience as they protected the food sources, waterways, and traditional medicines that nourish their holistic health and well-being. For those who are often outdoors and in remote areas, physical distancing is a natural

way of life. Is the rest of Canada capable of absorbing the lessons from Indigenous peoples and these practices? Perhaps we should.

Despite these better-than-feared outcomes, COVID-19 has taken its toll on Indigenous people in other ways. Take the opioid crisis in BC. In April 2016, the province's medical health officer declared a public health emergency due to the rising number of overdoses and deaths. BC's First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) released data in July demonstrating a tragic exacerbation of this crisis within BC First Nations during COVID-19. First Nations overdose deaths increased by 93 percent in the first five months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, and the percentage of First Nations people in the overall total of overdose deaths rose from 9.9 percent to 16 percent. (In BC, First Nations people constitute 3.3 percent of the population.) The FNHA postulates several explanations: an increase in drug use occurring when individuals were alone due to physical distancing, decreased access to and utilization of health care services, and increased toxicity of drugs as supply chains constricted during the pandemic. And the response to this crisis is markedly different. "When it comes to COVID," Nel Wieman, the organization's acting deputy chief medical officer, says, "the slogan essentially became, 'We're all in this together.' And, when it comes to people who use substances, the thinking is, 'I'm glad it's you and not me.'"

Whether one is talking about newcomers in the urban core of our largest cities or Indigenous people on reserve, the interplay between health and social factors is complex. Sometimes, a COVID-19 death is a death by overdose, or by suicide, rather than by a virus; we may come to see more kinds of COVID-19 deaths before the pandemic is over.

#### BREAKING THE LOGJAM

**T**HAT WE ARE in the midst of an opioid crisis is not news. Nor is it news that the staff at long-term care facilities are underpaid, or that there are too few of them. It isn't news that pharmaceutical care is long overdue, or that wait times



are too long, or that even a universal public health care system leaves vulnerable populations behind.

The real news is that we can do something about all these things.

The opioid crisis in BC has persisted for years, yet the province flattened its first COVID-19 curve in four months. What COVID-19 has shown us is that, in the face of a terrifying possibility—mass death, an overwhelmed health care system—the excuses we use to justify the status quo dissolve, and profound change can happen much more quickly than we are used to imagining. Some of the logjams in both our services and our thinking have been broken.

Early this year, even as hospitals were creating new critical-care wards and training their staff in the donning and doffing of PPE, other transformations were afoot. When Lindsey Longstaff's seven-year-old son stepped on a nail this spring, she decided to try virtual care for the first time. Longstaff has severe asthma, and the nearest emergency department is in Regina, a forty-minute drive away, so she wanted to avoid a trip. After downloading a virtual-care app, Longstaff had an assessment with a nurse, sent photos of her son's wound, and got a call from a doctor shortly afterward. She was told he didn't need stitches and was shown how to clean and dress his wound herself—all of which was an exciting enough development in the speed and convenience of health care delivery that it got covered by CTV.

Before COVID-19, virtual care seemed a long way off in Canada. In 2018, only 8 percent of Canadians reported having had a virtual visit with their health care provider. Today, many providers and hospitals rely on virtual care to check in with patients and monitor their conditions. In one survey, more than half of respondents said their most recent health encounters, in April, May, and June 2020, were virtual. The overnight adoption of billing codes for physicians doing virtual care, allowing us to be paid for providing these online and phone services just as we are for in-person visits, was game changing. Assuming those billing codes are here to stay, many of us will never go back to a

time when a patient needed to come in person for a simple issue that could just as easily and safely be dealt with virtually.

Canadians often assume that shortening our long wait times and expanding publicly funded services must involve more money, more hospitals, more operating-room time and more specialists. Of course, sometimes more resources are needed. But reorganizing and redeploying what we already have will get us pretty far.

A rich literature exists on how to fix wait times in Canada. Interprofessional teams, which include skilled providers like nurses, pharmacists, and physiotherapists, reduce reliance on doctors, who are often the bottlenecks when it comes to health care waits. Single-entry models—in which patients are given the next available appointment with any qualified specialist in their region rather than waiting for a particular specialist—improve flow by using a single, common wait-list for a given procedure. Reducing demand is also important: scaling back on low-value tests and procedures is difficult to do, but the potential benefits are extremely high. Both patients and doctors tend to believe that providing more services, in the way of tests, treatments, and procedures, will result in better health outcomes, but often that isn't the case. When it comes to interventions, more isn't always better. Strengthening primary care and home care so that most care occurs with a provider who knows you well and is easily accessible is key to eliminating waits for specialists. And, in this day and age, the use of technology, like the kind used by Longstaff and her son, holds enormous potential.

All of these have appeared in proposals and articles that date back to long before the pandemic, but it took the pandemic to get action on implementing even some of them. "For years," says Chris Simpson, a cardiologist and former president of the Canadian Medical Association, "doctors have paid less attention to the unwanted clinical-practice variation that exists out there in the real world. Why do patients in one region get these tests and procedures at higher rates than other regions? The pandemic-induced

slowdown... gives us an opportunity to look hard at our waiting lists. A hard look at appropriateness. A hard look at alternatives to surgical and procedural care, where appropriate. And a hard look at the huge clinical-practice variation in diagnostic testing. It's an opportunity to improve the quality of the care we receive, to reduce low-value care, to enhance equity, and to use our resources in a wise and prudent way."

But, perhaps surprisingly, the experiment that may have had the biggest impact on health during COVID-19 didn't take place in the health care system at all. Virtually overnight, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy stabilized the incomes of hundreds of thousands of Canadians; other emergency measures prevented residents from losing their housing. This is income support for the twenty-first century: easier to apply for, quicker to access and set up, structured not just to replace income but to supplement it. If we made programs like this permanent, reconfiguring them into a form of guaranteed annual income, the health benefits could be profound.

Much more than by MRI machines or surgery, health is fostered when kids grow up in safe households, with nutritious food on the table and access to education, in a climate free of fear and trauma. "When public health measures closed down large tracts of the economy in response to COVID-19, we had a system up and running in a matter of weeks that didn't require mountains of paperwork or intrusive 'means testing,'" says Evelyn Forget, an economist in the department of community health sciences at the University of Manitoba. "All that was required, it seems, was a change in attitude. COVID-19 showed us that we can break through what we thought were hard limits on our ability to deliver income security."

This matters to doctors like us because financial stability is an even stronger influence on health than access to health services is: it's social determinants of health, like income, education, and housing, that are far more influential. Between 1993 and 2014, in Ontario, residents of the poorest areas were

more than twice as likely to die from a preventable cause than those living in the wealthier neighbourhoods were. People in the lowest income group are also less likely to receive health care when they need it and are 50 percent less likely than those in the highest income group are to see a specialist or receive care in the evenings or during the weekend. As the Canadian Medical Association has pointed out, there are hundreds of studies confirming that people in the lowest socioeconomic groups carry the greatest burden of disease. As a result, the CMA (among other bodies) has called for policy action to improve the social and economic circumstances of all Canadians. In time, we may learn that the CERB, widely viewed as an economic program, was the most important health program of the pandemic.

**E**VERY NIGHT, for the period of time when the nation was most intensely gripped with preventing the virus's spread, people would come out onto their balconies and porches to clap and cheer, banging pots and pans as a way of thanking health care providers and other essential workers for their contributions to keeping people safe. Of course, we were glad to see those contributions celebrated in this way, and we are proud of our work and the work of our colleagues and friends at the front lines of health care. But we couldn't help but feel that those of us who work in health care should be the ones saying thank you. The extent to which Canada has so far avoided the worst-case scenario, sparing us from having to work in untenable and terrifying circumstances, is only because of the actions taken by the public.

Physical distancing. Staying home. Socializing on Zoom. Wearing masks. Forgoing restaurants, movie theatres, visits to the gym, hugs with loved ones, birthday parties, long-planned trips. Scraping by without work. Working from home. Living on less. Home-schooling kids. Staying away from the bedsides of loved ones in the hospital. All this, and more, was done by each of us and all of us.

Perhaps the biggest news of the pandemic is that people who normally do not

see themselves as powerful are exactly that. Whether Canadians feel it or not, we have proven that we have the power to protect and enhance the health of our communities. That engagement, that willingness to pitch in to protect others, is what can now be harnessed in subsequent waves, in the recovery, and in the future we will build together. What remains to be seen is whether that power will indeed be harnessed.

In the 1964 report that formed the blueprint for national medicare policy, justice Emmett Hall recommended that medications be included in Canada's public health care plans so that people would not have to depend on their employers to ensure treatment. Recommendations to increase accountability and quality in long-term care date back to the 1966 Final Report of the Special Senate Committee on Aging in Canada. In 1974, Marc Lalonde, then minister of national health and welfare, issued a report called *A New Perspective on the Health of Canadians*, in which he recommended that public health interventions should focus their attention on people with the highest risk of exposure to disease, such as those living in poverty. And, in 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report called on the government, "in consultation with Aboriginal peoples, to...close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities." The problem isn't that we don't have a plan.

In 2018, *The Lancet* published a special issue on Canadian health care. One of the two central papers (which we were privileged to co-author with a diverse group of researchers from across Canada) argued that this country needs a renewed social contract. "Universal health coverage is an aspiration, not a destination," we wrote. Since then, the fallout from COVID-19 has served to further unmask the gaps in our health care that have long been written about by scholars across the country. It's well past time to expand the core basket of medicare services to include pharmacare, mental health care, and other medical services we currently ignore, and to reimagine how health services are delivered in order to eliminate

wait times for nonemergency services. To design progressive home-care services and smaller home-style institutions that could provide older people with the dignified care they deserve. To address suicide, mental health, addictions, chronic diseases, life expectancy, and the availability of health services within Indigenous communities. To treat the biggest causes of ill health—the ones that are rooted in social and economic inequity—instead of only the ones we find easy to identify under microscopes and in operating rooms.

The familiar refrain for many followers of health and social reforms in Canada has been that we know what we need to do, we just need to do it. Now, through force of circumstance and perhaps without meaning to, we have finally begun the work. A terrifying glimpse of our own vulnerability has broken the logjam of health system reform, of income stabilization reform, of public and citizen engagement in health. Maybe this pandemic can mark a shift from wishful thinking to responsibility—from aspiration to expectation about what we actually mean and what we actually deliver when we say, so proudly, that our health care system is "universal." We used to talk about whether big change would ever be possible. Now we know it is. ❧

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*The O'Hagan Essay on Public Affairs is an annual research-based examination of the current economic, social, and political realities of Canada. Commissioned by the editorial staff at The Walrus, the essay is funded by Peter and Sarah O'Hagan in honour of Peter's late father, Richard, and his considerable contributions to public life.*



## LOOKING AHEAD

# Justice

*In 2021, we'll start reimagining our institutions*

**BY DALBERT B. VILARINO**

LIKE MANY PEOPLE this past year, I've been thinking about policing and prisons. My hope for the future is that these institutions will be abolished and reimagined in ways that prioritize the well-being of marginalized and racialized people. This would be radical, but these systems are intractably and intrinsically violent, racist, and non-rehabilitative. I dream of a society that instead invests in creating vibrant, healthy, and safe communities. 🤝

JUSTICE

# THE NEW LOBSTER WARS

*Inside the decades-long East Coast battle between fishers and the federal government over Mi'kmaw treaty rights*

BY ZOE HEAPS TENNANT  
ARTWORK BY MARCUS GOSSE

**J**UST BEFORE NOON on a warm Wednesday in August 2019, Marilynn-Leigh Francis slowed her boat down and looked out across the water. The buoy wasn't there. She sat at the bow, held the wheel, and considered the currents. An army-green baseball cap shielded her eyes from the sun. It was almost high tide, and the strong pulls in the Bay of Fundy had likely made her lobster traps disappear, hiding them beneath the ocean's surface. As she'd hoped.

"See?" Francis called back to her friend. "Tide's pulling our buoy down."

"I was gonna say." Tiffany Nickerson was perched on an empty trap at the stern of the small skiff. It was her second day out fishing with Francis.

The Mi'kmaq have fished these waters, along the coast of what is now Nova Scotia, for millennia and have called this place home for just as long. Francis, like Nickerson, is Mi'kmaw, and she was teaching her friend how to catch lobster.

From the boat, the port town of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, appeared in miniature. Like it is to so many coastal communities in the Maritimes, lobster is part of the local DNA: along the town's main strip, shops sell nautical kitsch—smiling cartoon lobsters drawn on cards, mugs that say "work like a captain, play like a pirate." Tourists pass through the port and nearby coastal



towns to eat at restaurants with names like Captain's Cabin or The Crow's Nest. Diners pick lobsters from tanks and don plastic bibs to catch the splatter when they crack open the shells.

Lobster is Canada's most valuable seafood export. And the sea around southwestern Nova Scotia, or Kespukwitk, where Francis fishes, is one of the largest and most lucrative lobster-fishing areas in the country. (Kespukwitk is one of the seven districts that make up the vast Mi'kmaw territory of Mi'kma'ki.) Federal law requires all fishers to operate with a licence. But, like many Mi'kmaw fishers, Francis and Nickerson assert that they don't need one. Which is why

Nickerson has to learn about more than just how to set traps.

"I wonder if DFO got it," Francis said to her friend as her boat rocked on the waves. Francis checked the location on a GPS device hanging from a cord around her neck.

It wouldn't be the first time officers from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, commonly known as the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), had hauled Francis's traps out of the water and locked them up in a fenced-off compound. Francis was fishing without a licence that day, as she always does. She was also fishing in August, three months before the start of the DFO-regulated

season. After providing for her family and giving some of her catch to Elders in her community, Francis usually trades or sells the rest. To the DFO, that's another affront: without a commercial licence, any sales or trades, however small, are considered illegal.

The DFO regulates fishing in oceans, lakes, and rivers in Canada, which includes determining—and enforcing—who can fish when, where, and how much they can catch. The department issues fishing licences and decrees, among other things, the start and end of lobster-fishing seasons. Officials schedule the seasons around factors such as when the crustaceans breed and moult and when their new shells have hardened enough to preserve the meat inside. In the waters where Francis drops her traps, the lobster season usually runs from the end of November until the end of May.

Fisheries officers police the waters and shorelines to try to catch fishers they accuse of fishing and selling lobster illegally. Many Mi'kmaw fishers, including Francis, assert that they have an inherent right to fish and make a livelihood outside Canadian regulations, a right that is enshrined in the treaties their nations negotiated with the Crown in the eighteenth century. In 1999, a Supreme Court decision, *R. v. Marshall*, confirmed Mi'kmaw people's treaty rights to fish, hunt, and sell their harvests—but the federal government has yet to honour the ruling. Which is why, for the past two decades, the DFO and many Mi'kmaw fishers have been engaged in a seemingly endless loop of surveillance and counter-surveillance operations. Despite having their traps and gear seized over and over, many Mi'kmaw fishers haven't given up fishing on their own terms.

"No, I think the tide's pulling it down," Francis said. She had intended for her traps—or pots, as they're often called—to be invisible to the officers who patrol these waters. And she wanted to drop some more before she and Nickerson called it a day.

**LEFT** *Living Off the Land Together: Lobsters (Jake)*, 2020

Francis is from Acadia First Nation. She's thirty-seven, about five foot six,



and she often wears a ribbon skirt made from camouflage fabric (“because I’m always in battle”). She’s been fishing lobster since she was fourteen. According to Francis, the DFO’s official lobster season is “their season,” not hers.

“I’m gonna drop one right here,” Francis said to her friend. She tied a buoy to one of her traps.

Francis had labelled all her buoys with “Treaty 1752 Marilyn Francis,” written in black Jiffy marker. Nickerson watched as her friend pushed the trap over the side of the boat. The pot splashed as it hit the water. The treaty name, written on the white buoy, bobbed on the surface.

Fisheries officers have been known to go undercover, to slip out onto the water in the middle of the night to microchip lobsters in Mi’kmaw fishers’ pots in order to try to trace the shellfish. Less covert operations include seizing Mi’kmaw fishers’ traps, catch, boats, and even trucks. Sometimes it’s a handful of pots, like the twelve that Francis usually fishes. Other times, they seize hundreds of kilograms of lobster and drop them back into the sea.

Conflicts along the East Coast have been surging lately—and not just between Indigenous fishers and the government. Many non-Indigenous fishers have long accused Mi’kmaw fishers who operate outside the DFO’s regulations of poaching, fearing the toll on lobster stocks and, by extension, on their own catches and income. Like many Mi’kmaw fishers, they feel the federal government hasn’t done enough to address the Supreme Court ruling and bring clarity to treaty rights. With frustrations mounting over the past two decades, many Indigenous and non-Indigenous fishers and leaders have had enough. In a November 2019 article in the *Chronicle Herald*, a Nova Scotia paper, a non-Indigenous fisher described the rising tensions as “a loaded gun waiting to go off.”

**D**ONALD MARSHALL JR. and his spouse, Jane McMillan, took turns pulling up nets and emptying eels into a small outboard motorboat in Pomquet Harbour, Nova Scotia. It was a bright August morning in 1993. They’d heard the eels that year were big and



running well. Kat (“eel” in the Mi’kmaw language) are loved by Elders, to whom Marshall would give the best ones. The kat might be hung and dried or gutted for katawapu’l (eel stew).

While they checked their nets, a boat with armed DFO officers pulled up alongside them and asked to see their fishing licences. (All fisheries officers are trained by the RCMP and equipped with firearms, batons, pepper spray, and body armour.) Marshall told them that he didn’t need a licence because he was Mi’kmaw, from Membertou First Nation, recounts McMillan in her book, *Truth and Conviction*. “Everyone needs a licence to fish,” one of the officers said to him.

“I don’t need a licence,” said Marshall. “I have the 1752 treaty.”

The officers wrote down Marshall’s and McMillan’s names and took a net as evidence.

The Treaty of 1752 is one of several treaties that Mi’kmaq Nation chiefs negotiated and signed with the British between 1725 and 1779. These treaties, often referred to as the Peace and Friendship Treaties, are based on sharing the land and trading and also included other neighbouring Indigenous nations. The Indigenous signatories and their descendants were promised the freedom to hunt, fish, and trade in exchange for an assurance that they would not “molest His Majesty’s Subjects.” The Treaty of 1752,

in particular, was on Marshall’s mind that day because he knew that James Simon, a Mi’kmaw man, had used it in court just eight years earlier to defend his right

to hunt. In *Simon v. The Queen*, in 1985, the Supreme Court wrote: “The Treaty of 1752 continues to be in force and effect.”

A few days after Marshall and McMillan were questioned by the officers, they sold the 463 pounds of eels they’d caught, at the going rate of \$1.70 a pound, for \$787.10. They went back out to the harbour to reset their nets. When they returned two days later, their nets and boat were gone. Later that fall, there was a knock at Marshall and McMillan’s door. Two fisheries officers had come to notify them that they were being charged with violating federal fishery regulations on multiple fronts: for fishing and selling eels without a licence, for using illegal nets, and for doing so after the DFO had declared the fishing season closed.

Marshall was forty, soft-spoken, and slender. His mustache was light brown, like his hair. And, by 1993, his name had already been in the news for years. In 1971, Marshall was sentenced to life imprisonment for a murder he didn’t commit. It was the first high-profile wrongful murder conviction in Canada to be overturned.

Donald Marshall Jr., right, is greeted by lawyer Anne Derrick, left, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in September 1999



Fishers from Sipekne'katik First Nation gear up at a wharf in Saulnierville, Nova Scotia, in October 2020

After eleven years in jail, Marshall was acquitted. A Royal Commission on Marshall's prosecution found that "racism played a part"—the miscarriage of justice,

wrote the commission, was "due, in part at least, to the fact that Donald Marshall, Jr. is a Native." Across Canada, Marshall's name became synonymous with a flawed justice system.

Marshall's eel-fishing case moved from one court to another. "I got sick a couple of times," said Marshall, according to historian Ken Coates, who wrote about the case in his book *Marshall Decision and Native Rights*. "I thought I'd never be in this court again." The charges against McMillan, who is not Indigenous, were dropped early on. It was clear to the first judge who heard the case that the trial was about more than fishing charges: it was a test case for Mi'kmaw treaty rights.

The Mi'kmaw have been pushing back against hunting and fishing restrictions for as long as can be remembered. In 1927, Mi'kmaw grand chief Gabriel Sylliboy was arrested for hunting out of season. He is believed to be the first to use the 1752 Peace and Friendship Treaty in court to fight for the protection of his rights to hunt and fish. Sylliboy was convicted of the charges, but after the Treaty

of 1752 was upheld in *Simon v. The Queen* in 1985, his conviction was nullified. He was pardoned posthumously in 2017, almost ninety years after his conviction.

Marshall's trial was watched closely. Thirty-four Mi'kmaw and Wolastoqi First Nations in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec would be directly affected by the case. A verdict in favour of Marshall, affirming his treaty right to catch and sell eel, could be interpreted more widely. It could assert the treaty right to harvest and sell other fish, as well as game, plants, and trees, outside the Canadian government's regulations. Indigenous people across the country wondered what legal precedent the ruling might set for them. News clippings often quoted Marshall saying he wasn't going through with the hearing for his own sake: "I was there for my people."

The trial moved slowly. Marshall's legal team shifted its focus from the Treaty of 1752 to the Peace and Friendship Treaties of 1760 and 1761. These treaties outlined the Mi'kmaw right to not just harvest but also earn a living by trading the catch. Marshall lost in provincial court and was rejected in the court of appeal. But, on a Friday in September 1999, six years after the DFO took Marshall's nets and boat, the Supreme Court of Canada confirmed that Marshall had a treaty right to catch and sell fish. "Nothing less would uphold

the honour and integrity of the Crown," wrote justice William Ian Corneil Binnie.

But the language of the Marshall decision was opaque. The ruling stated: "The accused's treaty rights are limited to securing 'necessaries' (which should be construed in the modern context as equivalent to a moderate livelihood), and do not extend to the open-ended accumulation of wealth." Those two words, *moderate livelihood*, would get caught up in public debate, like a fishbone in the throat, for years to come.

Many wondered why, after so many non-Indigenous people had accumulated wealth from the resources in their territories, the Mi'kmaw were being confined to living "moderately." The decision didn't outline any parameters for what constituted a "moderate livelihood." How would it be measured? More than twenty years later, these questions remain unanswered.

Many non-Indigenous fishers were livid about the ruling, fearing the potential effect on their fisheries. Tensions rose as Mi'kmaw fishers headed out to drop lobster traps without commercial licences, some for the first time. In one instance, around 600 non-Indigenous fishers were reported to have blockaded a harbour. The DFO was not prepared for the ruling or for the unrest it triggered.

"We knew instantly that [the ruling] was going to change our way of life," recalls Sterling Belliveau, who served as the chairperson of the Lobster Advisory Board for southwestern Nova Scotia at the time. After working as a commercial lobster fisher for thirty-eight years, Belliveau is now retired and keeps busy mending lobster traps. Like many non-Indigenous fishers, he worried about how the ruling would affect his fishing community. He watched as hundreds of boats captained by non-Indigenous fishers went to Yarmouth to protest the ruling. Many demanded a rehearing.

In November 1999, two months after the Marshall decision was released, the court took an unusual step and issued a clarification, known as *Marshall 2*. In the clarification, the court stated that treaty rights were not unlimited. The government had the power to regulate

the industry, but it had an obligation to consult with Indigenous nations if their treaty rights might be affected. The court wrote that treaty rights to catch fish can be limited “on conservation or other grounds.” It offered no clarification on the meaning of “moderate livelihood.” Conflicts on the water escalated.

The period following the Marshall decision is known unofficially as the Lobster Wars. Though the violence began to ease in the early 2000s, by many accounts, the wars never really ended.

Fisheries and RCMP officers, some dressed in riot gear, were reported to have used batons, tear gas, arrests, raids, and trap seizures to stop Mi’kmaq fishers from operating. Indigenous fishers told reporters at the time that DFO officers had pointed guns at them. The DFO denied these allegations. Some news reports described fisheries officers ramming Mi’kmaq fishing boats. Thousands of Mi’kmaq lobster traps were destroyed. Boats operated by Indigenous fishers were sunk. The RCMP laid some charges, against both non-Indigenous and Indigenous fishers.

Much of the violence was concentrated in Miramichi Bay, off the shore of Esgenoôpetitj (Burnt Church First Nation, New Brunswick). One widely circulated video, shot in Miramichi Bay, showed a large government vessel speeding up and running over a small Mi’kmaq fishing boat, forcing the fishers overboard, and then gunning for their vessel again. One Mi’kmaq fisher later described being pepper sprayed by officers while he was still in the water.

An independent consultant, hired by the Canadian government to file a report following the unrest in Miramichi Bay, wrote: “Some tens of millions of dollars were spent on enforcement in an atmosphere that was described to this consultant as resembling certain police state operations.” In 2000, the federal government, controlled by a Liberal majority, tried to quell the Lobster Wars by offering interim fishing deals to the thirty-four communities tied to the Marshall decision. These deals were not an implementation of the ruling: they didn’t address treaty rights. Instead, in

exchange for commercial licences, federal funds, and training, bands had to assimilate into existing DFO regulations. The same regulations that Marshall had fought, and won, to be exempted from.

Many bands were concerned that signing the DFO’s deals would infringe on their newly affirmed treaty rights. But, as an extensive body of scholarship has shown, the legacy of colonization and discriminatory Canadian legislation had left many bands struggling with poverty. Mi’kmaq communities could not afford to build up the infrastructure needed to sustain capital-intensive lobster fisheries on their own. For bands trying to provide adequate housing, health services, education, and employment to their members, it was difficult to turn down the government’s offers. According to Jane McMillan’s book, *Truth and Conviction*, the negotiations fractured Mi’kmaq leadership. By 2007, all but two of the thirty-four communities had signed agreements.

The stress of the conflicts and the lengthy trials took a toll on Marshall’s health. Saddened by the backlash against Mi’kmaq treaty rights, he never ate another lobster. After years of suffering from a chronic respiratory disease, he died in 2009, ten years after the Supreme Court ruling, at the age of fifty-five.

In the fall of 2019—twenty-six years after fisheries officers seized Marshall’s gear in Pomquet Harbour—his eel net was discovered in a DFO office. Salt and mud still clung to the fibres.

“THERE ARE SERIOUS constitutional issues that DFO has never come to grips with,” says Bruce Wildsmith, the lead lawyer on Marshall’s case. Wildsmith, who lives in Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, and who isn’t Indigenous, has been working on Mi’kmaq-rights cases since 1974. He acts as legal counsel for the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq Chiefs and the Kwilmu’kw Maw-klusuaqn Negotiation Office.

The court’s ruling, he says, placed the onus on the department to both recognize Mi’kmaq treaty rights and propose regulations for what constitutes a “moderate livelihood.” (Indigenous rights and treaty rights are protected

in section 35 of the Constitution Act.) With no progress on either front over the past two decades, the DFO is operating in a legal grey area, he says.

Currently, the DFO issues fishing licences for commercial fishing (including communal commercial licences, which are issued to a band; a band council then allocates a licence to an individual fisher or to band-employed fishers); recreational fishing (which prohibits selling any catch); and the food, social, and ceremonial (FSC) fishery. The latter is a direct outcome of the 1990 Supreme Court decision *R. v. Sparrow*, which stated that Indigenous people have a right to fish for food, social, and ceremonial purposes. But, according to the DFO, it is illegal to sell FSC catches.

Commercial lobster fishing requires massive investments of capital. According to a 2019 report from the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI), a public-policy think tank, the price of a licence can exceed \$2 million, and boats can cost more than \$160,000. (Some fishers estimate that boats can cost much more—over \$500,000 in some cases.) Since the Marshall decision, the DFO has tried to address the ruling by increasing Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqey involvement in the existing commercial lobster fishery through financial support and training. According to the MLI report, federal funding to promote Indigenous engagement in the commercial lobster fishery between 2000 and 2018 totalled more than \$500 million. Some of that funding was spent on a voluntary buyout program through which the government bought licences back from some non-Indigenous fishers and then allocated them to bands as communal licences. The government’s buyouts often included the purchase of fishers’ boats and gear, but a lot of the used fishing gear that was distributed to Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqey communities was found to be worn and too costly to repair.

After the Marshall decision, on-reserve fishing revenue for Mi’kmaq communities in Nova Scotia grew from \$2.4 million, in 1999, to just under \$52 million, in 2016, according to the MLI report. (That’s a small fraction of the province’s lobster industry: the value



of lobster exported from Nova Scotia in 2014, for example, was nearly \$580 million.) Contrary to many non-Indigenous fishers' fears, the report found, the rise of Indigenous commercial fishing did not destabilize the industry.

Some Mi'kmaw leaders and fishers are calling for an alternative fishery, governed by Mi'kmaw authorities, that recognizes their communities' rights to catch and sell without adhering to DFO regulations. This past August, the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw Chiefs, with the support of the grand council and band councils, released a working document outlining standards for a Mi'kmaw Netukulimk livelihood fishery. (The Mi'kmaw philosophy of Netukulimk can be loosely defined as using the natural bounty provided by the Creator for the well-being and self-support of the individual and the community without endangering that bounty.) The standards are intended as a guide for communities to then set their own regulations for a livelihood-fishery plan, and they outline requirements like registration, accessibility, and consistency with Netukulimk. (Some non-Indigenous fishers are opposed to communities developing their own fishery plans outside of the DFO's regulations, fearing that a patchwork approach to managing the fishery may harm the future of the industry.)

This past fall, two bands in Nova Scotia launched their own Mi'kmaq-governed fisheries. Sipekne'katik First Nation launched its fishery on September 17, the twenty-first anniversary of the Marshall decision. Potlotek First Nation followed suit in early October. These fisheries are considered illegal by the Crown. "While the public may not comprehend a fishery outside the realm of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans," Terrance Paul, chief of Membertou First Nation and then co-chair of the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw Chiefs, stated in a press release, "that does not make our fishery illegal." Later that month, Paul, who has served as the chief of Membertou First Nation, Donald Marshall Jr.'s home community, for thirty-six years, stepped down as co-chair: Membertou First Nation had left the assembly. Paul told the CBC that

he blamed the DFO for creating divisions within Mi'kmaw leadership.

In a response to proposals for Mi'kmaq-governed fisheries, Bernadette Jordan, minister of fisheries, oceans, and the Canadian Coast Guard, posted a statement on Facebook directing attention back to a series of deals the department has been trying to negotiate since 2014. These deals, called Rights Reconciliation Agreements (RRAs), are time-limited, legally binding agreements negotiated between the Crown and bands. The agreements outline Indigenous rights, including fishing, for the duration of the RRA (anywhere from ten to twenty-five years). The deals offer conditional

**“We fish in the fog,  
we fish at night.  
We fish at the  
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access to the existing commercial fisheries and may require Indigenous fishers to conform to DFO regulations. "Until an agreement is reached with DFO, there cannot be a commercial fishery outside the commercial season," Jordan wrote in her Facebook post in September. "Fishing without a license is a violation under the Fisheries Act."

The contents of the agreements aren't public, and the language used to describe them in confidential DFO documents, obtained through an access-to-information request, paints a murky picture at best. (A copy of one of the signed RRAs was also obtained, but the text was entirely redacted.) According to one internal government document, however, an RRA "seeks to reduce the risk of litigation for the term of the agreement." Bands that sign one of the new deals would have a hard time suing the DFO. It's not yet

clear how this provision would be implemented. RRA negotiations have been taking place behind closed doors.

As of early November, only three bands have signed RRAs—the Maliseet (Wolastoqiyik) of Viger, in Quebec, and, in New Brunswick, the Elsipogtog and Esquogpetitj (Burnt Church) First Nations. According to Wildsmith, they did not hold community referendums to guide their decisions. The deals have been publicly denounced in the press by many Mi'kmaw leaders. To some, the RRAs aren't about "rights" or "reconciliation" at all: they just reinforce the status quo. And, in recent months, the status quo has been rapidly careening out of control.

**I**N EARLY SEPTEMBER 2019, in the middle of the night, Ashton Bernard, a fisher from Eskasoni First Nation, in eastern Cape Breton, was stopped by fisheries officers after he pulled into a wharf near Yarmouth. He told the officers that he was fishing for a moderate livelihood. The officers seized his thirty-two crates, about 1,450 kilograms of lobster—more than \$20,000 at market prices—and released the crustaceans back into the water, according to a partially redacted document that matches the details of the case. But the officers didn't charge him that morning. Bernard asked for documentation, some kind of evidence for what they were doing. One of the officers wrote "32 crates seized" on a piece of loose-leaf paper. In May, more than eight months later, Bernard was charged with fisheries violations. His case is now in court.

Bernard's is one of dozens of similar accounts. Cody Caplin, who is Mi'kmaw and from Ugpi'ganjig, or Eel River Bar First Nation, has had his gear seized multiple times by fishery officers. They have also seized his boat and his trailer. "I been asking the creator to stop this madness and let us fish," he wrote to me. The DFO later charged Caplin with fishing out of season. He has a court date set for December, but he says his gear was sold at an auction and he was never reimbursed. (When asked to confirm whether gear seized from fishers may be sold at auctions, the DFO pointed to the Fisheries Act, which states, among other things, that when

officers seize gear or catch, they “may retain custody of it or deliver it into the custody of any person the officer or guardian considers appropriate.”)

Some Mi’kmaw fishers have developed covert tactics to avoid run-ins with the DFO. Alexander McDonald’s house is a stone’s throw away from Saint Mary’s Bay, where he’s been fishing for nearly half his life—and where he’s been getting charged by the DFO for just as long. “We fish in the fog, we fish at night,” he told me. McDonald, now fifty-eight, is the former chief of Sipekne’katik First Nation and a descendant of Jean-Baptiste Cope, the Mi’kmaw chief who signed the Treaty of 1752.

Other fishers, like Marilyn-Leigh Francis, plan for the tides to hide their traps beneath the water’s surface. “We fish at the most dangerous times because we’re trying to be incognito,” says McDonald.

The DFO’s routine seizure of traps, lobster, and sometimes boats and trucks force Mi’kmaw fishers off the water, at least for a time. “By charging people and taking them to court, you get them off the water,” says Simone Poliandri, an associate professor of anthropology at Bridgewater State University whose research focuses on Mi’kmaw rights and who spent the summer of 2000 on boats with Mi’kmaw lobster fishers. This approach by the DFO, says Poliandri, is similar to the tactics used in the United States, in the 1970s, by the FBI to suppress Indigenous activists in the American Indian Movement, which sought to address issues of systemic racism against Indigenous people. It has the effect of tying up their time and resources and taking them away from fishing, says Poliandri. If fishers are fighting charges in court and spending money on lawyers, they don’t have the time or the resources to fish.

For Indigenous fishers, it’s often hard to predict when officers will make an arrest, seize their gear without laying charges, or lay charges and then drop them. In any case, “it’s a way of infringing on someone’s rights without legally infringing on their rights,” says Chris Milley, an adjunct professor in the marine-affairs program at Dalhousie University.

The DFO has the power to arrest fishers who are in violation of the Fisheries Act, which includes those fishing without a licence and those fishing outside the department’s seasons. Under the act, officers are authorized to seize anything they believe was used to commit a fisheries offence: boats, vehicles, gear, fish, and any “other thing.” The department can wait up to ninety days before returning seized items if no charges are laid. If charges are laid, five years can pass before the case is heard in court.

McDonald has saved paper copies from his DFO charges and hearings over the years. His most recent charges were laid in 2015, after he went fishing in Saint Mary’s Bay with two of his cousins and his son. While driving home with his catch, he was pulled over by fishery officers. He told the officers that his party had been fishing for a moderate livelihood.

McDonald and the fishers were charged with violating fishery regulations. They spent two years shuttling back and forth from Sipekne’katik First Nation to the courthouse in Digby—a two-and-a-half-hour drive each way—to argue their case. The Crown ultimately dropped the charges. McDonald and the three fishers sued the DFO for racial profiling; he says the case was settled out of court.

Nobody I spoke with could discern a logical pattern in the DFO’s practices. “There is this uncertainty about how they will treat any given situation,” says lawyer Bruce Wildsmith. Which raises the question of what principles, if any, are guiding the department’s conduct—when officers will seize Mi’kmaw traps, lobster, and gear, whether they will lay charges, and why.

On a windy Friday morning in August 2019, I drove south from Digby on Highway 1, a quiet two-lane road that follows the shores of Saint Mary’s Bay. I was headed to the DFO offices in Meteghan to put these questions to the department directly. My cellphone had been lighting up all morning. Fishers were texting and calling to say that officers were out on the water, pulling up Mi’kmaw traps.

As I drove closer, I could see stacks of lobster traps locked behind a metal fence.

Inside the squat building, I spoke with Dwayne Muise, who has worked with the

department for nearly two decades. He said that things had become more tense on the water than they’d been in years. He declined to elaborate further and later refused to speak to me again. About a week after our conversation, I heard from Debbie Buott-Matheson, a communications adviser at the DFO. She’d heard that I had spoken with Muise. Any DFO interview requests had to go through her, she told me. After we hung up, I typed her name into Google. Buott-Matheson’s presumably tongue-in-cheek Twitter bio read: “Spin Doctress & dealer in creative truth telling.”

Buott-Matheson refused to arrange a follow-up interview with Muise or with any other DFO officer or representative. Jane Deeks, the press secretary for the DFO’s minister’s office, also refused to arrange any interviews related to moderate livelihood. “It’s a very sensitive subject,” she wrote in an email. She offered to respond to written questions. I told her I’d already sent the DFO a dozen questions and received a paltry reply.

Most of the fishers and legal experts I’d spoken with had the same questions I posed: What is the DFO’s guiding principle when seizing traps, gear, and boats belonging to Mi’kmaw people fishing for a moderate livelihood? What determines whether the DFO will lay charges against Mi’kmaw fishers? And why, two decades on, has the department still not defined what constitutes a moderate livelihood?

The DFO had replied to three of my twelve questions, two of which they’d rewritten in their own words to make them less specific. The responses were similar to the information found on the department’s website. I asked Deeks whether the department could provide a more detailed response. “I can confirm we have nothing more to add,” she wrote back a week later. (The DFO later responded to further questions by email.)

I turned instead to a DFO veteran. David Bishara worked as an officer for thirty-three years and left when he felt that, morally, he couldn’t go on. He had been on the front lines of the Lobster Wars in the early 2000s. And he had been there for the years leading up to Marshall. Bishara had followed orders

to board Mi'kmaw vessels; to seize gear, traps, and lobster; to make arrests; and to surveil Mi'kmaw fishers—photographing crates of lobster coming out of the water and following them to fish plants. Bishara had never spoken publicly about leaving the DFO. When I cold-called him, it was as though he had been waiting for someone to ask him about those years.

“Enforcement was pathetic,” he told me. “You didn’t even want to have your uniform on.” For a few years after the Marshall decision, the orders would pivot sporadically, he said. “Until somebody decided, ‘Okay, we’re not gonna go about it this way, we’re gonna go about it with full-fledged enforcement. And we’re gonna go seize gear, and we’re gonna go charge the Native fishermen.’”

Bishara felt that the orders did not respect the Mi'kmaw rights that had been upheld in the Marshall decision. “I blame it on ignorance and poor, poor management.” Now, he says, “I see things deteriorating all over again.” He faults the DFO for the recent breakdown in the fishing community.

I would later find, while listening through audio recordings from a 2018 hearing at the courthouse in Digby, an answer to at least one of the questions that I’d put to the DFO. It was a trial for the charges laid against Alexander McDonald, his son, and two of his cousins in 2015, when the men were fishing lobster outside the DFO’s regulations. Muise, the fisheries officer I spoke with at the DFO offices in Meteghan, was one of the officers involved. He was cross-examined about whether the department’s fishing seasons apply to those fishing for a moderate livelihood.

Under oath, Muise said, simply, “There’s no regulation to deal with moderate livelihood right now.” In other words, when it comes to regulating treaty rights, the DFO doesn’t seem to know why it’s doing what it’s doing either.

After the DFO refused to facilitate any interviews, I called active officers to see if they would speak to me anonymously. Months went by before one called me back. The officer said they’d picked up the phone to call me many times but had gotten scared. Now, exasperated with

the department’s mismanagement, they were willing to speak. (Out of fear of repercussions, they spoke with me on condition of anonymity.)

Officers are forced into an impossible position, they explained. “We’re the boots on the ground,” they said. “We just want clear legislation. We don’t have it.” DFO officers are operating in “no man’s land,” the officer said. They and their colleagues take the heat, but the problem doesn’t lie on the front lines: “When you get above the enforcement section,” they said, “that’s where it gets wrong.”

“I’m just caught right dead in the middle.”

## Non-Indigenous fishers circled Mi'kmaw vessels, cut their traps, dumped their pots outside a DFO office, and barricaded a wharf.

**O**NE FALL DAY a few years ago, McDonald arrived at the wharf and saw that the thick ropes that moored his boat had been burned off. His boat, *Buck and Doe*, was nowhere to be seen. It was later found drifting in the middle of Saint Mary’s Bay, on fire. Another time, on a snowy Christmas morning, his lobster pound, on Little Paradise Road, was burned to the ground. It took firefighters hours to put out the flames. The RCMP considered both fires suspicious, though no charges were laid. Attacks like these are seen by many as expressions of the growing animosity within the fishing community.

“I don’t go see a psychiatrist or psychologist or nothing. But people around me see that, when I go fishing, my anxiety’s high,” said McDonald. He has nightmares, too. “Nightmare after nightmare of DFO attacking us.” In another dream,

he is asleep on his boat when someone sets him on fire.

Stories of Mi'kmaw fishers’ boats being burned and sunk have made headlines on the East Coast for years. But, in recent months, the clashes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous fishers have catapulted into national and international media.

“I stayed out of this battle as long as I could,” said Colin Sproul from his home in Delaps Cove, on the shore of the Bay of Fundy, last spring. Sproul, a non-Indigenous fifth-generation lobster fisher and president of the Bay of Fundy Inshore Fishermen’s Association, has been watching with concern as Mi'kmaw vessels fish outside the DFO’s seasons and regulations. And it’s not just small skiffs, like the one that Francis works out of, but large-scale boats with crews, he says. Sproul has grown increasingly frustrated that over two decades have passed without any clarity from the DFO about its regulations. The uncertainty of how and when the government will implement the 1999 court ruling, and how that may affect non-Indigenous fishers, ripples throughout rural fishing communities, including Sproul’s. His son, who is thirteen, wants to be a lobster fisher like his dad, his grandfather, and the generations before them. (It’s not uncommon for lobster-fishing licences to be passed down through generations—Sproul’s licence was once his father’s, and it was his grandfather’s before that.) Sproul doesn’t know if his son will have a future in the fishery. Fishing communities like Sproul’s exist because of the lobster fishery. “With no lobster industry, there’s nothing left.”

The federal government has lacked “the political courage” to address the Marshall decision, said Sproul. “The buck has stopped in these communities, and it’s been left for us to sort out,” he added. “It’s completely, patently unfair for the federal government to do that. They have to figure something out legally, in Ottawa, and not leave it to us.” (Three Mi'kmaw parliamentarians have called for the creation of an alternative body that would allow for Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik to work together, directly with the Crown,

# Boundary

BY EVIE CHRISTIE

The soft, snow-fattened hills passing  
as a wraparound background, not so much simile  
as another way to say  
I've been here before.

Cows, field-boundary fence, highway  
grave markers. Netflix and Prime half emptied  
the parishes. Shuttered arena snack bars—kids play  
hockey in the towns now.

I get out of the car and lean at a fence to catch  
my breath; it isn't to be caught. I look at the horse, white  
in the white field. I look square at him.

We're both here, it's dusk, my heart beats too  
fast. His eyes are big glass balls of dim  
light and snow. He has nothing  
for me. A brown horse trots away

from a barn, startles me, presses  
a large calm face to the fence boards. They see I have nothing  
for them and move along. Snow falls, the hoof-pocked snow,  
snowed upon and snowed upon

again, silently. You wouldn't know it at all, really,  
until the following day.

instead of dealing with the DFO one band  
at a time.)

A couple of years ago, after Indigenous fishing boats were vandalized, Sproul said, some leaders in the fishing community decided they'd had enough. Impatient with government inaction, Sproul, alongside other non-Indigenous fishing-industry representatives and Mi'kmaw chiefs, started a dialogue group to discuss fishing matters. The informal committee held a handful of meetings and calls about the fisheries, but as tensions escalated, the group unravelled. "Things are about to turn bad," Sproul messaged me this past August. Shortly afterward,

Sipekne'katik First Nation launched its moderate-livelihood fishery and conflicts started to flare.

The aftermath saw weeks of unrest on and off the water. In various incidents, according to news reports, non-Indigenous fishers circled Mi'kmaw vessels, cut their traps, dumped their pots outside a DFO office, and barricaded a wharf to restrict Mi'kmaw fishers' access to the sea. Non-Indigenous fishers shot flares at a Mi'kmaw vessel. A Mi'kmaw boat was burned. A van belonging to a Mi'kmaw fisher was torched. In October, two lobster pounds used by Mi'kmaw fishers to store their catches

were raided and vandalized, and hundreds of dead lobsters were littered on the ground. In one case, two Mi'kmaw fishers—one of whom was Randy Sack, Donald Marshall Jr.'s son—were forced to lock themselves inside the lobster pound while roughly 200 people surrounded the building, trashed it, and threatened to burn it down with the men trapped inside. Though RCMP officers were present, they have been accused of standing idly by. When the pound was destroyed by a fire a few days later, Michael Sack, chief of Sipekne'katik First Nation, demanded military intervention. In mid-October, the government approved increased RCMP presence in the area. Meanwhile, DFO officers continued to seize traps set by Mi'kmaw fishers, according to statements from the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw Chiefs. A week later, the government issued a press release stating that Allister Surette, a former Liberal provincial cabinet minister, had been appointed to serve as a special representative in efforts to "continue to walk the shared path of reconciliation."

The Sipekne'katik First Nation's new fishery also stirred concern among neighbouring First Nations: in late October, Carol Dee Potter, chief of Bear River First Nation, whose reserve lies near the southern coast of Saint Mary's Bay, said her band hadn't been consulted about how the fishery would affect their own community. Bear River First Nation, wrote chief Potter in a press release, was facing backlash from the unrest, and her community's long-standing relationships with non-Indigenous fishers were suffering.

Sproul blames the federal government for driving a wedge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous fishers—communities, he said, that "have to share the ocean"—effectively deflecting attention away from the DFO's own practices. "It's been incredibly painful," Sproul said. "I'm fearful for what it means for the future of my relationships with Indigenous people right here in my hometown."

Kevin Squires, a non-Indigenous lobster fisher and president of the eastern Cape Breton branch of the Maritime Fishermen's Union, said he hears concerns from members about what the

future of their fishery will look like if Mi'kmaq fishers increasingly catch and sell lobster outside of government regulations. "We can't do our part in preparing our members for the fishery to come when we don't know," he said. While he said he respects that the discussions around RRAs are nation to nation and therefore don't include non-Indigenous fishers' voices, he fears the impact RRAs might have on less established fishers' livelihoods.

Echoing the DFO, many non-Indigenous fishers have expressed concern that Mi'kmaq fishing outside DFO regulations will deplete lobster stocks. But, to some, the sustainability argument is a mask. "I don't think conservation has ever been a sincerely significant factor in the exclusion of Mi'kmaq to the fishery," said Dalhousie University's Chris Milley, who has been researching the politics and management of fisheries for decades. (Milley is now assisting bands to develop Netukulimk livelihood-fishery management plans.) To the government and non-Indigenous fishers, said Milley, the health of lobster stocks isn't as important as the health of the lobster market. That, some suggest, is what they're really fighting over.

**T**HE LIGHT-BLUE SKY stretched high across the Atlantic as Marilyn-Leigh Francis and Tiffany Nickerson drove home from the harbour. Their reserve, Acadia First Nation, is less than a ten-minute drive east of where Francis docks her boat at Lobster Rock Wharf.

After driving Nickerson home, Marilyn-Leigh stopped by her mother's house to say hi before walking across the gravel road to her own home. Her mother, Marilyn Francis, was beading at the kitchen table and watching the cooking show *The Chefs' Line* on Netflix.

"They said DFO's gonna be down there tomorrow taking traps out," Marilyn said to her daughter, pausing the show. Below the flat screen TV was a banner that read: WE ARE ALL TREATY PEOPLE. A friend had called to tell Marilyn what they'd heard. Marilyn and her family were used to community members calling or messaging or stopping by to let them know about the DFO's movements.

Marilyn used to fish too. Growing up, she had been taught by her own mother and grandmother about her inherent right to fish, hunt, and harvest. It's something she's passed on to Marilyn-Leigh. Like her daughter, Marilyn has had her share of run-ins with the DFO. In 1998, she was charged with violating fishing regulations for fishing lobster without a DFO licence, the same way Marilyn-Leigh fishes today.

"I'm not trying to be a lobster mogul," Marilyn-Leigh said to me. "I'm trying to be self-sufficient." She doesn't use the term *moderate livelihood*: the word *moderate*, she says, isn't right to her. "That's their word," she told me, adding that, to her, it means just enough to survive. The Canadian government, she went on, is "so used to us not having anything that even a little bit of something is too much."

Marilynn-Leigh lives below the poverty line, like many Mi'kmaq living on reserves in Nova Scotia. According to the most recent census, the average annual income among members of Acadia First Nation was \$18,042. (The average income on reserves across Nova Scotia was \$20,477.) The Indian Act of 1876, and related policies of the Canadian government, displaced and dispossessed Indigenous people from their land and resources. The Crown "gave" small tracts of land, often the least desirable pieces, to Indigenous communities as reserves, while settlers kept the most desirable plots for themselves. Today, Indigenous people have 0.2 percent of their traditional territories as reserve lands.

This past fall, Marilyn posted a photo of six steamed lobsters on Facebook, their shells a fiery red, and wrote: "Would anyone like to barter 6 fresh cooked lobsters for 1 loaf of WW bread, 2% farmers milk, molasses, eggs, bag of dog food and tide. Message me. Welalin." (*Wela'lin* is the Mi'kmaq word for "thank you.") She later posted a photo of the groceries that she'd gotten in the trade and wrote: "That's what I'm talking about, received my food after bartering cooked lobster. Love it."

"We barter a lot," Marilyn-Leigh explained. "If our truck breaks down, barter

a mechanic. Go and get gas, ask, 'Do you want \$20? Or do you want lobster?'" Bartering, said Marilyn-Leigh, is like fishing outside the DFO system. "Using our own resources, using our own land," she said. "Now the government is completely cut out. That's why they're pissed."

Outside Marilyn's kitchen window were around twenty of Marilyn-Leigh's lobster traps, some stacked over six feet high. They were piled on the grass where the DFO had left them. Officers had hauled some of her traps out of the water and locked them up in the DFO compound. After Marilyn-Leigh asked for her pots back, an officer dropped them in her yard.

"So, are you gonna have fish with me tonight?" Marilyn asked her daughter.

A piece of halibut was thawing on the counter. The fish had been expensive, said Marilyn, "almost twenty bucks" for a piece that would feed two. She hoped Marilyn-Leigh and her husband would eat with her, as they often did. Marilyn-Leigh said they'd bring potatoes. Later, while Marilyn-Leigh stood at her kitchen sink washing the potatoes, her brother Peter Francis pulled up to her back porch in his pickup truck. He'd just heard from a friend that DFO officers were out on the water. Peter taught Marilyn-Leigh how to fish, and he keeps an eye out for her.

"They didn't haul in nothing," Peter told Marilyn-Leigh through the open truck window, his engine still running. "They're probably getting their bearings for tomorrow. Marking 'em," he said.

"Oooh, they're getting ready to attack. Attacking the little Indians," Marilyn-Leigh teased.

"They're probably gonna haul tomorrow," he told her before driving off, his tires kicking up dust.

Marilynn-Leigh texted Nickerson and made plans to go fishing the next morning, when the tide would be low. Then she turned back to the potatoes and put water on the stove to boil. ●

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**ZOE HEAPS TENNANT** is a writer and producer living in Toronto. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *Monocle*, the *Globe and Mail*, the CBC, and the BBC.



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## PSYCHOLOGY

# Why Do We See Dead People?

*Humans have always sensed the ghosts of loved ones.  
It's only in the last century that we convinced  
ourselves this was a problem*

BY PATRICIA PEARSON

ILLUSTRATION BY MEGAN KYAK-MONTEITH



**I**N THE late spring of 2015, my brother-in-law paid a visit to my sister's grave, in a lush meadow cemetery amid the Gatineau Hills of southern Quebec. My sister had been dead, at this point, for seven years, and the couple had been separated for twelve. Doug sat in the grass among planted geraniums for half an hour or so, musing about the rise and fall of their marriage. He told Katharine, or her grave, that he was sorry for the part he had played in the dissolution. Then, plucking up and tossing a handful of grass, desultory, he began his two-and-a-half-hour motorcycle journey back to Montreal.

"The landscape is open there, with a big wide sky, but it was overcast and had started to rain—just barely, but it made me a bit nervous," Doug later told me. Even fit riders in their fifties experience the occasional lapse in confidence. "It wasn't until I was maybe halfway home that I felt her presence."

"The sense wasn't physical at first," he went on, "just this really nice, strong awareness of her. And then I had the distinct sensation of her arms around me and her leaning in close against my back. It was tactile and fantastic. I felt warm. I was completely calm and happy, smiling from ear to ear. That hardly ever happens to me." His nervousness about the

rain ebbed, and it occurred to him that Katharine was there to keep him safe on behalf of their two sons. She—her presence, her spirit—rode behind him for twenty minutes or so. "What I know is that it did not feel at all like a product of my imagination," he said. "It felt external to me. It felt *real*."

He wasn't prepared to name what the experience pointed to: that he had been visited by my sister's ghost. Like other secular North Americans, he is aware that we must uphold a certain paradigm and say "this cannot be." After all, Doug considers himself a rationalist: the son of an engineer, himself an amateur astronomer. Nevertheless, the sensed presence





mattered deeply to him. “It was,” he said, “a remarkable, indelible experience.”

Sigmund Freud was the first to articulate the concept of “wishful psychosis” in grief, a notion of temporary madness featuring wilfully conjured visions of the dead. A person who’s lost someone might see the face of their beloved, hear their voice, notice the smell of their pipe or perfume, or simply be struck by a feeling of their presence. Such ghostly apparitions were diagnosed as fanciful yearnings by Freud—warning signs of some lingering dependency. In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” he urged his patients toward recovery by severing bonds with the dead: move on

and let go, lest sorrow bedevil and sink you. For decades, this was one of the counselling profession’s central models for grief recovery: a sort of tacit agreement played out between therapist and patient that what the latter sensed, no matter how comforting it may be or how real it may seem, dwelled in their head and would best be forgotten. When the physician W. Dewi Rees uncovered the prevalence rate of these hallucinations in a 1972 study of Welsh widows and widowers—about 50 percent—he also found that three-quarters of them had never spoken of the experience before being asked in his survey. Unsurprisingly, these people didn’t wish to

be pathologized. They also didn’t want to move on.

In 1970, English author Sylvia Townsend Warner, a frequent contributor of short stories to *The New Yorker*, had an unexpected visit from her dead lover, Valentine Ackland, lost the previous year to breast cancer. Roused one night at three, Warner found, as she later wrote in her diary, that Ackland had followed her to bed. “Not remembered,” she clarified, “not evoked, not a sense of presence. *Actual*.” In the dark quiet of their British cottage, this “actual” Ackland, solid yet ephemeral, engaged in a reuniting embrace. Then she was gone. “I held her again,”

Warner noted with deep satisfaction. “It was. It is.”

Ought anyone to have argued with her? Death and its accompanying grief are often shrouded by awkward silences, but the unwavering prevalence of these apparitions, whether viewed as grief hallucinations or as ghosts, lays bare a metaphysical crisis at the heart of our common model of mourning: for there to be efficacy in recovery, these experiences must be respected as real. As counselling psychologist Edith Maria Steffen notes in her book, *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement*, there is a “controversial reality status” at play that can erode the trusting relationship between therapist and bereaved person if not handled with care and nuance. The same can be said for family and friends. The question is not whether these apparitions are real, it’s why the first impulse of many is to stifle these stories and dismiss the experiences as impossible.

FAMILIAL and fraternal hauntings have long been central to the stories we tell, from Enkidu’s ghost in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to Odysseus conferring with his slain brother-in-arms Achilles to Banquo’s discarnate presence in *Macbeth* to *Wuthering Heights*’s sorrowful Catherine. More recently, there’s erratic detective John River, who confers with his newly dead partner, Stevie, in the television series *River*.

In the nineteenth century, such fictive imaginings were often based on real losses as infectious disease swept through families. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, watched her toddler, Charley, die in a Cincinnati cholera outbreak during the summer of 1849. She began to read, as she described it, “of visions, of heavenly voices, of mysterious sympathies and transmissions of knowledge from heart to heart without the intervention of the senses, or what Quakers call being ‘baptized into the spirit’ of those who are distant.” Her husband, theologian Calvin Stowe, regularly perceived discarnates of one kind or another, according to English scholar Harold K. Bush, and mused in a letter to a friend, “Is it absurd to suppose that

some peculiarity in the nervous system... may bring some men more than others into an almost abnormal contact with the spirit-World?”

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Tom has a perception of his friend Eva’s postmortem presence. As Beecher Stowe would later write, the dead “still may move about in our homes, shedding an atmosphere of purity and peace.... We are compassed about by a cloud of witnesses, whose hearts throb in sympathy with every effort and struggle, and who thrill with joy at every success.”

The first scientific survey that examined visions of the dead was conducted in the 1880s by some founding members of London’s Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Investigations into the unconscious mind were coming into vogue, examining mysteries like hypnosis and dreams; meanwhile, the proliferation of cameras and telegraphs, with their figures frozen in time and disembodied voices, were upending what people thought possible. The SPR scholars, some of them scientists, were fascinated by the question of *how we know what we know*. One of these members was Alfred Russel Wallace, co-inventor of the theory of evolution, who disagreed with Charles Darwin that natural selection explained consciousness. Another was Samuel Clemens, also known as Mark Twain, whose interest stemmed from 1858, when he’d had a vivid dream of his brother lying in a coffin. Not long afterward, that same brother died in a steamboat explosion on the Mississippi River.

SPR member and Cambridge scholar Frederic Myers was intrigued by the many stories of ghosts and synchronistic dreams as well as by folklores concerning visions and doppelgängers. Many cultures across western Europe had their own versions. Scotland’s “second sight” was mirrored by Ireland’s *taidhbhse* (pronounced *tjiv-shuh*): “To see the double at night implies the death of the person seen,” as explained by folklorist Lewis Spence. The Bretons called such portents *intersignes*, while elsewhere in France one spoke of *revenants*. These were popular beliefs, but they certainly had never been examined through the scientific method.

According to Deborah Blum’s 2006 book, *Ghost Hunters*, Myers, along with his colleagues Edward Gurney and Frank Podmore, undertook a randomized survey of the British public, putting out the question, “Have you—when in good health, free from anxiety and completely awake—had a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a human being, or of hearing a voice or sound which suggested a human presence, when no one was there?” They weren’t sure what they would find given the vagueness of the prompt. But, when the accounts came in, one surprise was the number of reports concerning ghostly apparitions of people known to the writer rather than spirits of the haunted-house variety.

A characteristic account in their collection, which, in 1886, they published in two volumes titled *Phantasms of the Living*, was provided by one Timothy Cooper, who described being busy at work: “I was going down into the cellar to fetch butter for a customer, and as I was on the top step, I saw my father standing at the bottom of the cellar steps in his shirt and night-cap, and he seemed to walk into the cellar. I went down and fetched the butter and looked for my father, who was nowhere to be seen.” At the time, his father was dying 400 kilometres away.

In 1889, wishing to expand upon this work, the SPR recruited 410 volunteers to each ask at least twenty-five British adults, from various walks of life, a similar question about spectral impressions. Approximately 13 percent replied that they had experienced the phenomenon. The men were able to identify and investigate eighty cases with corroborated evidence—through written documentation or witnesses—that the sensory experience corresponded with a death of someone known to them. Nine other countries participated in this Census of Hallucinations, including the United States (organized by “father of American psychology” William James), France (overseen by psychologist Leon Marillier), Germany, Russia, and Brazil, gathering 17,000 responses in total. Each survey reflected the results of the others, suggesting that between 7 and 19 percent

of people experience sensory hallucinations at some point in their lives.

It was some of the first social science data collected on this phenomenon. It was also the first international, albeit accidental, survey of grief hallucinations, which comprised a subset of the responses. “There is a marked accumulation of cases about the time of the death. They occur during fatal illness, whether this is known or unknown to the percipient, in increasing frequency as the death approaches—the largest number being reported as happening at or about the time of the death itself,” noted scholar Henry Sidgwick in his 1894 report on the census.

The SPR theorized that perhaps humans could intuit a significant calamity occurring to those they loved, that the mind could project a blast of telepathic energy that overcomes our mental barriers and is picked up as some kind of confirmatory hallucination—a voice, for example, or a scent.

In fact, such an experience prompted German scientist Hans Berger to invent the electroencephalogram, or EEG, a few of decades later. His revolutionary discovery of this now widely used medical procedure was an attempt to track whether electrical currents in the brain might have enabled his sister to “sense” the near collision he once had with a horse-drawn cannon, which had led his family to send an alarmed and otherwise unprompted telegram.

At this time, the fledgling field of psychology was attempting to establish itself as a science, and there was a desire among many professionals to distance it from matters of inquiry that might be deemed mystical or superstitious—anything that might offend the militant Darwinists of the era. The SPR hallucination surveys were, therefore, largely ignored by the scientific world.

William Dean Howells, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* from 1871 to 1881, defended the belief in ghostly visions from an emerging class of skeptics after his daughter Winny died in her twenties. “I would have the bereaved trust their mystical experiences for much truth which they cannot affirm,” he wrote

in 1910’s “A Counsel of Consolation.” “They may be the kaleidoscopic adjustment of our jarred and shattered being; they may be prismatic rays of celestial light: who shall say from knowledge?”

But Howells’s plea was cast aside, and the scientific community moved on from the paranormal. The SPR scholars didn’t help matters by turning their attention to mediumship: the theatrics and chicanery that inevitably accrued around seances caused the society as a whole to be thrown into disrepute, its body of work dismissed. For the Western scientific establishment, apparitions became

*“I don’t believe  
in just any  
ghost, but  
I believe in  
Grandma.”*

a laughing matter, a relic from humanity’s naive past. Ghosts were disregarded and forgotten, except by all the people who continued to sense them.

**W**ITH THE RISE of psychology as a discipline, grief therapy invariably evolved as a specialty, and Freud’s “severing bonds” model took the form of advising the bereaved to make peace and move on. They would “recover” from a loss only by redirecting their emotional energy toward new relationships. In this context, ghostly presences, now dubbed grief hallucinations, were viewed as obstacles to recovery because they represented an unhealthy clinging to the past. A study of London widows undertaken in 1972 by British psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes led him to conclude that seeing or sensing a deceased partner—which the widows unexpectedly described to him—must pertain to a frustrated attempt to reaffirm a lost attachment. The hallucination was thus an ineffective coping mechanism

and “may delay acceptance of the true situation.”

Likewise, psychiatrist Beverley Raphael dismissed grief hallucinations in her 1983 book, *Anatomy of Bereavement*, as common but unhelpful. “These perceptual misinterpretations reflect the intense longing and, like dreams, are a source of a wish fulfillment,” she wrote—the implication being that sensing the presence of the dead was infantile, like having an imaginary friend. As psychologist Dennis Klass argued in the mid-nineties, “The pathology of grief was associated with the stereotype of feminine behaviour”—dependent, clinging, irrational, hysterical. Klass himself disagreed with the assessment and, in 1996, proposed a new model of grief recovery called “continuing bonds,” which he thought better accorded with the reality of most people’s experiences. According to Klass, the best description of this model came from Tony Walter, professor of death studies at the University of Bath: “In the new model, the purpose of grief is the construction of a durable biography of both the dead person and the living person that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead and their ongoing interactions with the dead into their lives.”

Klass and his colleagues observed that some mourners didn’t experience their grief hallucinations or private conversations with their dead as impediments to recovery. One study of widows near Boston found that all sensed their spouses and none were swooning face down on their beds. “The widows who continued to have vivid illusions of perceiving the deceased did not differ from other widows in the study in their acceptance of death, apparent self-esteem, or movement to building a new life,” the researchers reported. “They also did not seem to be more isolated socially or to perceive themselves as more abandoned. They seemed rather to be better at this style of expressing grief, more accepting of it and more convinced of its meaning.”

This accorded with the research of non-Westerners, many of whom have cultures that create space for ongoing engagement with ancestors. A study of

Japanese widows, for example, found that their rituals of leaving food out and lighting candles for the present dead made them more psychologically resilient in grief. Similarly, American anthropologist Charles Emmons once conducted a study of ghost belief in Hong Kong. As one respondent told him, “I don’t believe in just any ghost, but I believe in Grandma.”

“New grief therapy techniques,” psychologist Edith Maria Steffen wrote, “draw on experiential connections with the deceased that appear to normalize and validate sense of presence and invite contact, even if only at a symbolic or imaginary level.” In other words, like dreams, they can be brought into therapy without provoking an existential crisis in the therapist: “[Sense-of-presence experiences] can be a gateway toward accessing ‘the back story’ of the relationship which can be therapeutically supported with specific techniques such as letter-writing and dialoguing with the deceased.”

The experience of sensing the dead has by no means been confined to women, though widows seem to be the cohort most studied. The First World War is filled with reports of soldiers interacting with newly dead comrades and siblings-in-arms. One such encounter was the subject of a memoir by Canadian soldier Will R. Bird, who was awoken at the front by his deceased younger brother, who urged him out of his tent and along a trench line moments before Bird’s sleeping position was shelled.

Journalist John Geiger, now CEO of the Canadian Geographic Society, describes similar experiences in his book *The Third Man Factor*, in which he tracks paranormal presences observed in extreme environments. One of his accounts comes from American astronaut Jerry Linenger, who sensed his dead father while aboard the Mir space station in the late 1990s. Linenger addressed his dad, who conveyed back that he was proud his son had achieved his childhood desire to fly to space. Geiger noted that whatever accounted for these types of interactions, which he remains agnostic about, they tended to be reassuring

rather than debilitating or symptomatic of poor coping.

When Klass proposed his shift to the “continuing bonds” model of grief therapy, many clinicians took the change on board but may have remained distinctly uncomfortable with the idea of grief hallucinations. In 2005, UK bereavement counsellor Sally Flatteau Taylor conducted a study on the experiences of bereaved clients who had sensed dead loved ones. She found that 80 percent felt patronized, misunderstood, or dismissed when it came to this element of their lives. For many, it can still be easier to keep the matter to oneself than to face a counsellor’s discomfort or disbelief.

That the dead do not always stay dead continues to rankle the scientifically minded. When Christopher Kerr, a Toronto-raised palliative care physician who heads Hospice and Palliative Care Buffalo, first worked with patients on rounds, he was completely unprepared for the number of dreams and visions his patients described that featured the consoling dead. “We never had any such discussion on the topic in med school,” he emailed me. In his 2020 book, *Death Is But a Dream*, Kerr writes, “The acceleration of the science of medicine has obscured its art, and medicine, always less comfortable with the subjective, has been more concerned with disproving the unseen than revering its meaning.”

And that’s the heart of the quandary. Nearly 150 years after the first SPR studies, scientists still have no proven thesis on what, exactly, is happening when someone hallucinates or senses the dead. “To date,” wrote three neuroscientists in one 2013 study, “no study specifically explores the neurofunctional correlates of visual hallucinatory phenomena in the bereaved population.” At present, there is simply no way to anticipate these events and so attempt their capture in a lab.

Even so, the first reaction for many upon hearing that someone has, say, seen their dead husband perched on the end of their bed one evening is to explain it away. *You were tired. Did you eat that day? It must have been a dream.* But what does that accomplish other

than stranding the grieving in a liminal place between solace and madness? Do we uphold a materialist scientific viewpoint because we believe all the great questions have been answered, or are we being gestural—afraid to appear out of sync with a consensus that presumes the mind is bounded by brain? Based on the many confidences I’ve been trusted with by thoughtful people who have seen the dead—members of Parliament, pediatricians, scientists, fellow journalists—I have come to think it’s the latter. We’ve accepted the dominant paradigm the way peasants once allowed monks to intone about the medical necessity of balancing humours only to quietly turn to herbalists and midwives later for more practical advice.

Some theorists now think that people in mourning experience “experiential cognition,” or a way of knowing that is difficult, if not outright impossible, to measure and quantify. Grief, this thinking goes, is intangible and not unlike how we experience beauty or pain.

But to think we can now comprehend and diagnose exactly what occurs when one sees an apparition is arrogance; by sticking to the old script of dismissal and denial, whose beliefs are we really humouring? It seems that we’re finally returning to what *The Atlantic Monthly*’s William Dean Howells wrote so eloquently more than a century ago: “I would have the bereaved trust their mystical experiences for much truth which they cannot affirm.” Some particularly daring observers, like anthropologist Jack Hunter, go one step further: “We do not automatically have to jump to a reductionist conclusion,” he wrote recently. In order to engage in genuinely empathetic listening without being patronizing to those who sense the dead, “we must be open to the possibility that what they tell us is true and real,” Hunter continues. “There may be more going on. Reality doesn’t play by our rules.” 🗿

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**PATRICIA PEARSON** is the author of eight books, including *Opening Heaven’s Door: What the Dying May Be Trying to Tell Us about Where They’re Going*.



## LOOKING AHEAD

# Activism

*In 2021, we should continue to hold power to account*

BY MAYA MCKIBBIN

IN 2020, as many of us were locked down due to the pandemic, we spent time reflecting on the inequalities around us. As citizens of one of the globe's wealthiest nations, we can fight for accountability. In June, amid a flurry of COVID-19 headlines, Alberta passed a bill that would see Indigenous land defenders fined or jailed if they block infrastructure such as railways and pipelines while protecting their own territories. In 2021, I hope we can hold governments accountable by staying informed and politically active, giving directly to community members, and continuing to learn from one another. 🌟

MEMOIR

# My Struggle with Sobriety

**T**ANSI, nitisiyihkâson Mel. Windsor, Ontario, nikî-nihtâwîkin kî-pipon. Epekwitk' êkwa Tiohtià:ke nikî-pê-ohpikin. Tiohtià:ke mêkwâc niwîkin. Niya âpihtawikosisân, ekwa nehiyaw, ekwa Nakoda, ekwa Saulteaux, ekwa moniyâw. Niya oma tastawâyihk iyiniw.

Hello, my name is Mel. I was born in Windsor, Ontario, in the winter time. I grew up on Prince Edward Island and in Montreal. I live in Montreal now. I am Métis, Nehiyaw, Nakoda, Saulteaux, French, and Irish. I am a Two Spirit person.

I am also a mother, a community worker, an artist, a traditional tattooer, and a writer. People see me as white because of my skin colour even though I don't identify as white. I recognize my privilege and responsibility to others in this regard. My paternal grandmother's family came from Manitoba, in the early twentieth century, and settled in Quebec. My Indigenous ancestors are from North Dakota, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. My mother is Irish. Her great-grandparents came from Limerick, Ireland, and settled on Epekwitk, Mi'kmaw territory (also known as Prince Edward Island; its name means, roughly, *lying in the water*).

When I tell people that I'm Native, French, and Irish, they often say things like, "Wow, you must really be able to drink!"

For most of my life, that was true. My first drunk was on gin at eleven years old. I remember being in a friend's basement with a bunch of others. It was fun. Lots of laughing and lots of booze. I threw up, of course. We also used to steal candy and smoke packs of Belvedere Extra Milds behind a store I remember being called Books 'N' Things. I'm not sure when I first started inhaling, but the first time I puffed on a cigarette was at the age of seven, with a babysitter, on the front stoop of our house in PEI. The basement of that house flooded and we were forced to move. It was too bad: my dad had done a stellar job on the stucco ceilings, even mixing in a hint of gold sparkle to the ceiling of my parents' bedroom. Wicked cool.

I often saw my dad drink. He also liked to fish and do crosswords to the point of obsession. My memory of my father is that he was usually angry, or that's how I interpreted his moods. (I didn't tell him about this story; I'm not sure he'll even see it. Although our relationship is a lot better than it was, I don't like to make him relive things unnecessarily.) For a long time, those

things pretty much summed him up for me. There are a few precious memories of him seeming happy. They usually involved the beach and eating lobsters or digging clams. I don't remember a time when he didn't smell like drywall, which is what he's always done for work. His boots were crusted with dried-up white globs, his jeans and jackets stiff with them, and every day, when he came home, his face was as if sprinkled heavily with powdered sugar, although he wasn't very sweet.

My dad drank stubby bottles of beer—Schooner, Ten Penny, Alpine—with his breakfast, which made him something of a legend to my guy friends. My dad always had a cigarette between his fingers. He went to the local bar, The Tack Room, after work. My sister and I would be forced to wait in the car while my mom went inside to give him The Look with her watery blue eyes and drag him out. In the car, waiting for what seemed an eternity, my sister and I would flick lit matches at each other, smoke dad's cigarette butts, and perform the Time Life Classics infomercial melodies as a duet.

Work dried up, and by the time my parents moved us to Montreal and I was in high school, I was drinking, smoking cigarettes regularly, and soon afterward, smoking hash and pot. As time went on,

*The decision to quit drinking was  
the right one for me. But, as I have learned,  
there's no perfect way to do it*

BY MEL LEFEBVRE  
ARTWORK BY LAURA GRIER

I used magic mushrooms, cocaine, speed, ecstasy, and acid. I once smoked heroin, although I'm not sure I actually inhaled, which sounds pretty funny. I have been involved in some very dodgy circumstances, and many a time I have thought to myself, I can't believe I'm still alive. I am not proud of this fact, but I am at peace with it.

By comparison, my mom didn't drink much. She smoked cigarettes here and there but never used anything stronger than that. I don't think I've ever seen her fly into a rage. Once, she hit me with a fly swatter. She cleaned and cooked and took care of my sister and me, making sure we had as much as we could on the money we had, which wasn't much; we supplemented it with welfare. At the beginning of every school year, we would be lucky to get a few new bits at Kmart—cable-knit sweaters, high tops, and jeans. My mom created a cozy home amid the wood-paneled walls of the apartments we lived in. She made frugal recipes that she'd learned from her own mom on their PEI farm. To this day, I love the sound of a dryer churning, the smell of fresh sheets, the taste of biscuits and rice pudding.

As unapproachable as my dad was, I knew that he loved us. I couldn't articulate or even grasp his damaged personhood, but I could, at least on some level,

feel his struggle. He never wanted us to be "like him." He always told us what not to do—don't drink, don't smoke, don't do drugs—as well as what *to* do—watch out, follow the rules, stand up for yourself, don't take shit, kick them in the cunt, tell them what's what. This was love, coming from my dad.

Once, when I was maybe fourteen, I found a pair of hot knives up high on a shelf: two butter knives, burned black on their tips from being heated up on the stove and then touched to balls of hash to produce a sweet smoke. Needless to say, my sister and I ended up using them ourselves. More than once.

As much as my mom tried to compensate for the model my dad set, the damage was done. By the time I was fifteen, I was drinking regularly, doing drugs, skipping school, sneaking out, and drifting into and out of relationships. I was unable to moderate anything: it was full throttle or nothing. In my experience, that's a hallmark of addiction. And it doesn't only apply to "bad" behaviour. For me and for others I've known, addiction can look like overachieving, "fixing" people, problem solving, organizing—all seemingly positive or altruistic acts that can take on a manic shape: anything that needs doing will be done *now*, as fast as possible.

At age thirty-nine, I had a baby. She became my world, but I suffered from postpartum depression and was still drinking. Parental drinking habits became a consistent joke between me and other parents whose children were at the same daycare: the parents who drank just to deal with their kids. They were all doing what I was, drinking every day and trying desperately to get into a routine of drinking only on weekends. It never worked. For years, my partner and I partied with other parents, at one another's houses, while our kids played together in the background.

Soon, I was waking up with hangovers every day. I had blackouts and was throwing up in the mornings more often than I'm comfortable admitting. I was bloated and angry. I was irritable all the time. I didn't want to play with my kids and my partner annoyed me. I couldn't be social without alcohol. I planned everything around alcohol: Where are we going? Will there be alcohol there? How much? Do we need to buy more? How many days until the next drunk? Do I have appointments I need to be sober for this week? Will my partner be mad at me? Can I disappear into a glass of booze forever? For much of the past twenty years, I've been a freelance writer, so I haven't had to get up and go to an



office. Pretty convenient when you're an alcoholic.

Essentially, I had turned into my father.

**T**HE DAY I decided to quit drinking, in October 2017, coincided with my first day of volunteering at the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal. And that was no coincidence: I believe it is the path that was set out for me by the Creator. The shelter is a caring place that provides temporary housing. Most of the clients come from Northern communities, for medical services, to visit family, or simply for a break. Some bring their children. There is some sadness there but also joy. I've learned much from the folks residing there, and being of service keeps me grounded and grateful. Among other things related to education, community building, and advocacy, I cooked for the clients on Saturday evenings and tried to provide some warmth and love through food.

I started Alcoholics Anonymous's twelve-step program on my first day of sobriety, and it seemed to coincide with my work at the shelter. My first AA meeting was at a Montreal spot I used to frequent, in the '90s, to hear poetry readings and spoken word. A rather dark basement, yet cozy, with Christmas lights sparkling across the ceiling, smells of coffee and old books, and smiles of welcome as soon as I entered. Immediately, I felt relief.

Of course, to protect the anonymity of my fellow participants—one of the program's strongest tenets—I will not name anyone, but everyone in that room created a space where I could cry, laugh,

and simply *be*. They understood me, and I them. I nodded a lot as they spoke, using words like *compulsive*, *obsessive*, *angry*, and *resentful*, but also *grateful*, *peace of mind*, *prayer*, and *forgiveness*. I could tell my truth and not be judged. Crosstalk is not allowed, so my thoughts never turned into a "conversation" about right or wrong. They simply *were*, left hanging in the air to dissipate naturally.

I went to meetings at a variety of venues. Some were in bright, sunlit rooms where I felt exposed, others in echoing church halls or basements, and still others in cramped spaces where we had to squish extra chairs in between people. I got a sponsor a few weeks in and managed to complete five of the twelve steps, which required a lot of self-reflection, analysis, acceptance, and forgiveness of myself and others. I turned myself inside out during this process.

Embarking on the path of sobriety is like shedding skin. Eventually, it's not altogether unpleasant, but at first, it was as if someone had sheared my skin right off and left me raw, my underlayer of bloody muscle and tendons bare and sensitive, vulnerable. And it was not only that others could see the truth but that I could see the truth and wasn't able to escape from it into a bottle.

Within days, I began to go through withdrawal, physical and mental: my skin crawled and my body raged, going through a continuous cycle of desperation and collapse. It wanted drinks, and if it couldn't get alcohol, it would look for other things to get high on, and any kind of risky behaviour would do: fast driving,

heated arguments, bingeing on food or TV. I still wonder if these compulsions will ever fully leave me.

I was able to speak about these things in AA meetings very freely. It wasn't easy, and I often broke down, but everyone in those rooms understood exactly where I was coming from and knew the hell I described. That kind of fellowship is difficult to find in the outside world. One that has no agenda other than to listen. Or so I thought.

**I**T'S NO SECRET that Europeans brought alcohol to what they subsequently named North America and used it as a tool to take advantage of Native peoples and their resources. Accounts from as early as the 1600s describe how, once exposed to alcohol, the Indigenous population refused to trade unless alcohol was part of the exchange. In Europe and New France, ale and wine were used as medicine for everyday ailments, in childbirth, and for nutritional value. Settlers introduced this way of life on our land—a long history of alcohol as a cure-all and as a weapon.

Today, mainstream settler society in North America revolves around alcohol, using it to celebrate every aspect of life: Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, Canada Day, the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, births, baptisms, weddings, divorces, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, funerals, brunch, afternoon cocktails, happy hour, nightcaps, and hairs of the dog. Meanwhile, many settlers still view Natives as drunks whether we are drinking or not.





This prejudice translates into stories of neglect for Indigenous people by the medical system. A 2019 report by former Quebec Superior Court justice Jacques Viens found it “impossible to deny” that Inuit and First Nations people in the province are victims of “systemic discrimination” in accessing public services, including health care. There are myriad examples of how this prejudice is exposed in a broader context in relation to alcohol. Between 2017 and 2018,

**I can hear the naysayers yelling that we need to take care of our own problems.**

Delilah Saunders, an Inuk Indigenous-rights advocate who won Amnesty International’s International Ambassador of Conscience Award for her work in advancing the rights of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, came dangerously close to liver failure after she was denied an emergency transplant because she failed to meet a mandatory six-month sobriety requirement. (Saunders said that she had a brief relapse after testifying about the murder of her sister to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.) In 2016, Kimberly Gloade, a Mi’kmaw woman from Burnt Church First Nation, was brought by ambulance to the McGill University Health Centre seeking treatment for severe stomach pain, but her medical insurance

card had been stolen, and she was told it would cost approximately \$1,000 to see the doctor. She died at home, six weeks later, of cirrhosis of the liver and heart failure. Time and again, Canadians have proven that, to them, Indigenous lives simply do not matter. The lack of access to health care caused by systemic racism within the health care system and within Canadian society as a whole has had detrimental effects on the health and well-being of Indigenous people: we have higher levels of stress, internalization of discrimination, unemployment and poverty, mental illness and suicide.

There’s something especially poignant about being an Indigenous person seeking treatment for addiction in Canada. Canadians drink more alcohol per capita than the worldwide average, according to the World Health Organization. Those age fifteen and older drank ten litres of pure alcohol per capita in 2016—3.6 more than the world average. But who is doing the drinking? One study in the US found that 60 percent of Native Americans hadn’t had a drink during the previous month compared with 43 percent of others studied. According to Statistics Canada, 31 percent of off-reserve First Nations people and 38 percent of Inuit were non-drinkers (meaning they consumed no alcohol in the twelve months preceding the 2011 and 2012 surveys) compared with 24 percent of the non-Indigenous population. The rate for Métis was 25 percent. “At ages twelve to twenty-four, 43 percent of First Nations people and 50 percent of Inuit were non-drinkers. The corresponding proportion of abstainers

for their non-Aboriginal peers was 36 percent, the same percentage reported by Métis in this age group.”

So, if Natives are drinking equal or lesser amounts of alcohol than non-Natives, why are the risks and outcomes for us so much worse? Simple: systemic racism. And I can hear the naysayers in the back (and in the front) yelling that we need to take care of our own problems. And I will reply: we are and we do, but with far less access to health care, less access to safe housing, and in many cases, no clean water to drink or bathe in. Indigenous people are disproportionately subjected to police violence; our Two Spirit, LGBTQ, intersex, and asexual community, women, and girls are disproportionately likely to be murdered or go missing; our families are disrupted as our children are stolen. How do we focus on thriving when we are always fighting?

During my time in AA, I learned so much. I overcame the incredibly vulnerable stage at the start of my sobriety and met many supportive people, for which I am grateful to this day. Through the program, many of the issues I now recognize that surround my family history and cultural experience became clear, and I developed a deeper understanding of service and giving back to community. My sponsor also taught me a lot, most importantly that recovery is about recovering parts of yourself that have been damaged and unable to fully develop, parts that once seemed protected by addiction as if by gauze.

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As the protective layers are removed, these wounds have the opportunity to feel the light, to breathe. They are able to start developing again; they can receive the attention they deserve.

However, the more I read *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*—a.k.a. the Big Book, the handbook given to new members—the more pissed off I became. The first edition was written in 1939, by a white man, with the help of others. Not only are women an afterthought in the text but it purports to not be religious while using the word *God* throughout, in relation to a higher power.

The matriarchy of my people and that of our more-than-human kin, specifically bison, has been incredibly healing and life giving for me. To know that I possess strength from the land and from my past and future ancestors is a relief. I can breathe just a bit easier when I understand this in any given moment, faced with any challenge. I reach into myself and find so *many*. We are always: we are now, yesterday, and tomorrow.

When I heard the Lord's Prayer at AA meetings, I felt insulted and excluded. The organization's tenet of secularism is clear, but some meeting goers, mostly men in my experience, would choose to forgo the usual Serenity Prayer and end the meeting with *Our Father, who art in heaven...*

Christianity was forced on Indigenous peoples by both church and state, through residential and day schools. In his 2013 book, *The Inconvenient Indian* (the basis for a documentary of the same name released in 2020), Thomas King writes, "Christianity, in all its varieties, has always been a stakeholder in the business of assimilation, and, in the sixteenth century, it was the initial wound in the side of Native culture."

That kind of Christianity, the kind that blatantly lacks humanity and seeks to oppress, hurt my family, and by extension, it hurt me. I don't trust it. In my sobriety, I have come to trust myself and the teachings of my community. The queerness that we embody, which is the land, breaks through this capitalist patriarchy, provides

my body and soul with a sense that I am, that we are, accepted. Disconnected from those teachings because of colonialism, each day is an exercise in reconnection through service, ceremony, language, kinship, and study. I honour my ancestors piece by recovered piece, as a hybrid of old and new, past and future.

AA helped me. I commend its members for creating a community, a place where I shared some of my darkest moments and did not feel judged. What I do criticize is the exclusion that stems from the Big Book.

At every AA meeting, announcements are made by the secretary. I remember when a new AA meeting sprang up in downtown Montreal; someone had named it The Tribe, and its ad mentioned that "First Nations people are welcome." As a Native person, I found the name offensive and felt similarly about the statement that Native people were "welcome." No one in the meeting said anything. When I was asked to be secretary, I read the meeting list and announced that The Tribe is a new meeting and that "Native people are welcome, everywhere, all the time, forever." People nodded. They seemed surprised that I had spoken out in this way. They shouldn't have been.

AA was based on the patriarchy of the 1930s, and although its fellowship means well, it expresses colonialism's language and approach. When a program advertises that "Native people are welcome," it means they would not otherwise be unless the dominant group invited them, and that means I'm not welcome. Not really.

**W**HEN I BECAME SOBER, my life changed quite a bit. Encounters with friends or strangers were often uncomfortable while I learned how to be social without the cozy fog of alcohol. I had to develop ways to cope with the witching hour: evenings. I was cooking less as that's when the daily boozing would usually begin. I saw my dry drunkenness more clearly: sober behaviour those with addictions develop over time that mimics drunkenness. In my case, it's moodiness,

irritability, control issues, lashing out, obnoxiousness.

At a party that I felt I needed to attend, people around me were drinking full tilt. People I knew very well were there, as well as acquaintances. I knew some were also using cocaine. Aside from one other person, I was the only one I knew of who was sober. I mingled for about ten minutes before finding the safety of my table. I stranded myself there for the rest of the night, eager to avoid everyone and all signs of alcohol as much as I could. The people at my table were drinking heavily. I longed for their dirty martinis, their pints of beer, their wine when it was ordered, inevitably, to wash down the mediocre food. My skin crawled, the music was annoying, and everyone was too loud. I ordered an expensive virgin mojito, which only made things worse. I switched to bubbly water and tried to make the best of it. It wasn't working. My friends were off somewhere mingling, their boisterous laughs bouncing off the walls. And, just before I called it quits, someone poured herself into a chair across from me and proceeded to tell me a story. Her elbows on the table steadied her body as it swayed from side to side ever so slightly. One of her eyes looked right at me, expressive and focused, while the other melted slowly toward the inner corner of its socket in a drunken, awkward sunset.

That was my cue: I got up, said quick goodbyes, then, as the default designated driver for forever, I told my friends that, if they wanted a lift, they had to follow me, *now*. They agreed in a happy haze. I saw one of my passengers at the bar, ordering another drink. I was pissed off, desperate for booze and feeling at risk. Thinking of how much she must have had already, I marched to the bar and informed her we were leaving. For a split second, she was furious that she wouldn't have time to down one more. My face must have told her that my mood was volcanic and my insides were churning, because she shoved the money back into her pocket and headed for her coat.

Finally, in the safety of the car, my passengers decided they weren't done: I would be dropping them off at a local

haunt for more drinks. As we drove across the city, they babbled and laughed, and I love them, so I started to calm somewhat, knowing we were heading back toward home. I laughed with them a bit, then dropped them off with messages of sincere love. They scampered and stumbled across the street. As soon as the bar door closed behind them and I turned the car toward home, I started to sob: the entire evening had been torture, like a dream you can't escape because your feet are mired in mud and no one hears you screaming. My body was so tired—it had been in a state of fight-or-flight the whole evening.

In my experience, addiction is this: the perpetual throwing of oneself over a cliff. It can take many forms—alcohol, drugs, sex, even front line activism—but the goal is always to put oneself at risk, to run from being still. Stillness means that, eventually, you must turn to the truth.

**E**VENTUALLY, I stopped going to AA. For me, it became more frustrating than anything else. It sounds reckless and like an excuse, and maybe it was, but a daily meeting at the time meant at least two hours out of my day, which included travelling there and back and the meeting itself. It also meant putting time into “working” the steps, meeting with your sponsor, and service: taking on a role in your home group for one month. This can vary from preparing the coffee to performing secretarial duties to speaking at other events. When you have kids, a job, friends, school, and pastimes, this can be overwhelming. I often wondered: Where do people find this much time for so long? Some have been dedicated to recovery for decades. I suppose, if you're truly committed, you do it; the participants of one meeting I frequented used to chime, in unison, before we dispersed: *It works if you work it.*

I wonder why other services are not promoted as much as the face-to-face meetings, which are great if you can get to them, but some people can't, and the reasons are many: accessibility issues, social anxiety, depression, job schedule, child care, chronic illness,

remote location, etc. Online options exist: live-streaming meetings, AA forums, previously recorded meetings, podcasts, meetings over the phone—and I think these are just as valuable.

While I do think supporting home groups and other members is a necessary element of what makes AA work, there are also whole communities of people outside these rooms who need service. And, from my perspective, it seems as though the anonymity of the AA membership is a downside. Members could be encouraged to give back to their communities in a broader sense: connecting with people who have other kinds of challenges encourages empathy and creates a wider social network of support, as I found working with Indigenous communities. When I think about drinking and sobriety, I also think about those who don't have access to the support that I do, and I go out and do something of service for them: source traditional meats, gather donations of clothing and supplies, organize book drives, or build relationships with other organizations that can volunteer essential services. Helping to build a stronger community allows me to see a future where Native people can thrive, no matter where we are or what we're going through.

I had made it through a year and a half of sobriety when I started drinking again. In 2019, I wasn't going to meetings, I had stopped my antidepressants in an effort to understand my baseline personality, my marriage was strained, my relationship with my kids revolved around my levels of irritation, I was doing a master's degree, I was working a couple of jobs, and my parents were visiting. I hit rock bottom and was sober as fuck. On the verge of my partner and I breaking up, we went for a walk in the park. I asked him if he thought I should go back on my medication. He calmly stated that it would be a good idea. He was relieved. I was relieved, letting go, giving in, facing the fact that some aspect of my brain is unbalanced and needs support. I decided to take the meds. But also, I wanted some wine. So we went and got a bottle of red and shared it with my parents on the night of the season-eight premiere of *Game*

*of Thrones*. That was one year and eight months ago. Somewhere in that time, I also started smoking cigarettes again, after fifteen years of giving up the habit.

The day I am writing this, I have joined a Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) meeting online. Everything is online now, in the midst of the pandemic. SMART is free and “open to anyone seeking science-based, self-empowered addiction recovery.” We are Zooming, and some of us have been CERBING; some of us are physical distancing, wearing masks, gloves, and face shields, while others are breaking rules; we are paying for our products through walls of Plexiglass and wondering what the death toll will be tomorrow. We are collectively grieving and transforming in a world none of us have experienced before. I've started my PhD, my partner and I are separating, and I'm moving out in the spring. I'm working three jobs. It has all changed. What hasn't changed is my struggle with addiction. Every day is a rebirth and each is filled with choices. I try to make the best ones possible within the capacity I have in each moment, accepting myself and trying to live by the motto inscribed on the AA chip I received on my first day of sobriety: Easy Does It.

What I have learned is that I am closer to myself and better able to understand and live Nehiyaw teachings when I'm sober. Being social without drinking is difficult, but it can be done. Being in touch with like-minded people who understand the struggle of addiction can get you through the worst moments or offer you the words of kindness and welcoming you need when you claw yourself from the depths and back onto the wagon.

I'm looking into hypnotherapy and acupuncture to treat addiction. One therapist said that my addiction is the result of an unresolved issue in a past life. I'm willing to go there. ➔

**MEL LEFEBVRE** is a Métis, Nehiyaw, Nakota, Saulteaux, French, and Irish community worker, artist, writer, researcher, and traditional-tattoo practitioner. She is a PhD student at Concordia University and the vice-president of the board of the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal.



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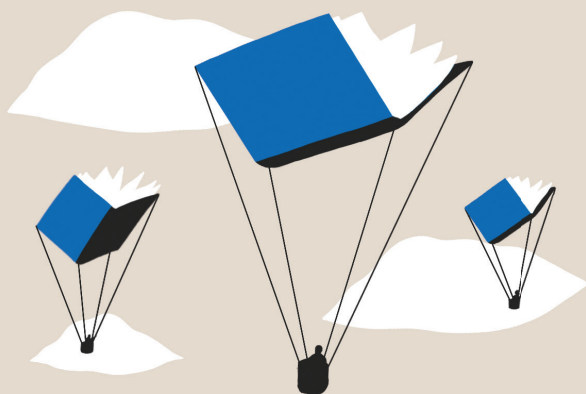


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# Canadian Authors Pick Their Favourite Books of 2020

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JULIEN POSTURE



## Washes, Prays by NOOR NAGA



Noor Naga's verse novel, *Washes, Prays*, follows Coocoo, a young woman newly arrived in Toronto, as she pursues a tumultuous relationship with her lover, the married Mohammad, and seeks respite with her best friend, Nouf. Naga articulates the contradictory and addictive cycle of desire and anguish as Coocoo questions the intimacies in her life—sexual, platonic, and religious—over three sublime sections. The book is, at times, a bummer, but it will also make you cackle. Naga has the ability to capture a universe within a few lines: “rain like glass needles so sharp I hear them slice the air clatter excitedly off the hoods of cars/nouf turns her face to the sky like a happy pincushion.” Holy and profane at once, *Washes, Prays* tells old stories in new language.

Adnan Khan is the author of *There Has to Be a Knife*.

## The Eyelid by S.D. CHROSTOWSKA



*The Eyelid* imagines a future in which wakefulness is a pharmaceutically powered state imperative to keep people productive and compliant. At odds with this arrangement is an unnamed narrator. Unemployed and ground down, he finds the potential of a new life after meeting Chevauchet, a charismatic activist-ambassador of a mysterious country called Onirica that promotes liberty, fraternity, and equality through sleeping and dreaming. Together, the narrator and the ambassador aid and abet nocturnal imaginations across Paris (now part of the globe-spanning Greater America). These revolutionary acts reveal other lives, stories, and possibilities for people living in a waking nightmare of totalitarian, market-driven, pill-popping, screen-surfing drudgery. S.D. Chrostowska's dystopian fiction, learned and lithe in its storytelling, holds up a cracked mirror to our time and place, daring us to take an honest look—and dream.

Randy Boyagoda is a novelist and professor of English at the University of Toronto. His most recent novel is *Original Prin*.

## This Red Line Goes Straight to Your Heart by MADHUR ANAND

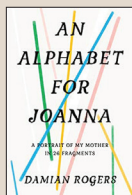


A family history crosses rivers, borders, seas, and cultures within the split structure of this memoir. In the first part, Madhur Anand recreates first-person accounts of how each of her parents' lives was upended by the 1947 partition of Punjab. She writes an intimate record of the haunting losses and forced new beginnings—all results of government bureaucrats drawing lines on a map—with lyrical prose that left me awestruck. Anand's own story appears in part two, stitched together with poetry and vignettes, and examines how the actions of one generation ripple through the next. I search for books that create openings within me and found one such portal here.

Helen Knott is the author of the memoir *In My Own Moccasins*, which was longlisted for the 2020 RBC Taylor Prize and shortlisted for a BC and Yukon Book Prize.

## An Alphabet for Joanna: A Portrait of My Mother in 26 Fragments

by DAMIAN ROGERS



Damian Rogers's new book ingeniously complicates the age-old structure of the abecedarian, borrowing its title from a long-out-of-print children's book whose addressee, Joanna, bears the same name as Rogers's mother, now ten years into a diagnosis of frontal lobe dementia and all but robbed of language altogether. Like the memories of Rogers's subject, however, these letters have been scrambled. *An Alphabet for Joanna* begins with the letter *E*, and not until page fifty-seven do we arrive at *A*, which stands for Art, and is followed by *M* for Magic. Part spell, part scrapbook, part elegy, part detective story, in its essence, this enthralling and heartbreaking memoir is a tribute to art's unique power to conjure the ineffable—be it memory, identity, or history itself—and to fix it into forms that endure. Rogers is an accomplished poet, and it shows in her luminous and beautifully cadenced prose.

*Suzanne Buffam is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently A Pillow Book, which was named one of the ten best poetry books of 2016 by the New York Times. Born and raised in Canada, she teaches creative writing at the University of Chicago.*

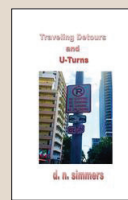
## Some People's Children by BRIDGET CANNING



*Some People's Children* follows teenager Imogene Tubbs as she uncovers the story of her own parentage in a maze of small-town gossip and family secrets. Bridget Canning captures a generation of Newfoundlanders maturing in the shadow of grueling economic and cultural collapse, acutely depicting the urgent desire to escape disaster while remaining tethered to notions of home. Canning deftly explores how evolving identities are hampered by the toxic masculinity still prevalent throughout much of the island. She does so while infusing the narrative with tenderness, authenticity, and complexity the likes of which could be rendered only by an author fully immersed in the contradiction of struggling to be whole during times of great fracture. Not since Joel Thomas Hynes's *Down to the Dirt* has a Newfoundland coming-of-age novel so relentlessly depicted the taxing challenge of surviving adolescence in rural outports. This darkly comedic novel is one of indignities, epiphanies, and hope.

*Megan Gail Coles's debut novel, Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club, was a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and CBC's Canada Reads and won the BMO Winterset Award. Her debut poetry collection is forthcoming in fall 2021.*

## Traveling Detours and U-Turns by D. N. SIMMERS



The now sadly late poet d. n. (Neil) simmers, deceased this past July, leaves us a final book, *Traveling Detours and U-Turns*, that evinces his undying affinity for Black Mountaineering Beats. He pursues E. E. Cummings-style clarity but also traces the Black Mountain school's BC offshoot, Tish, in exploring autobiographical anecdotes in sensual, succinct, vivid, and personable language: "Night puked down, every day / the roofs / tinkered beats / on every bunkhouse." In making wry social observations, simmers's tone is appealingly off the cuff: "The water below calls / and is answered by the jumpers. / They come out when the moon is full / and markets have crashed." Though there are shout-outs to Canadian poets Anne Carson and Patrick Lane, simmers is closest, I think, to American Richard Brautigan: both know that the only entree to the state of nirvana is via the state of nature.

*George Elliott Clarke is a former poet laureate of Toronto and parliamentary poet laureate. His recognitions include the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Fellowship, a gold for poetry from the National Magazine Awards, the Governor General's Award for Poetry, and the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award.*

## You Will Love What You Have Killed

by KEVIN LAMBERT  
*and La morte*  
by MATHIEU  
ARSENAULT



Kevin Lambert's debut novel, *You Will Love What You Have Killed* (newly translated into English by Donald Winkler), unspools a tale in which a pack of ghostly teenagers continuously return from the dead to take revenge on the amoral elders in the small, tight-knit community of Chicoutimi, Quebec. Lambert's is a dark yet poetic vision of a place, ruled by hate and revenge, in which the kids definitely aren't all right. But his youth in revolt provide a welcome punch to the gut.



For readers of French, Mathieu Arsenault's *La morte* offers a contemplation on the death of Arsenault's friend, the writer Vickie Gendreau. (Two of her books, *Testament* and *Drama Queens*, are now available in English thanks to translator Aimee Wall.) *La morte* is an intimate examination of dying that questions how we deal with grief in a time when traditional mourning rituals have slowly lost their meanings. It is a touching and brilliant account of the connections we keep with those who have gone.

—  
*Stéphane Larue's* first novel, *The Dishwasher*, won the 2020 Amazon Canada First Novel Award, France's Prix Senghor, and the Prix des libraires du Québec.

## This Is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man

by DAKSHANA  
BASCARAMURTY

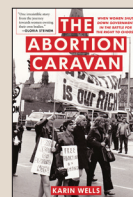


—  
Dakshana Bascaramurty, a reporter with the *Globe and Mail* (who is both my colleague and friend), first met thirty-year-old Layton Reid when she hired him to photograph her 2012 wedding. One year later, Reid reappeared in her inbox with an unorthodox request: he was dying of cancer and wanted advice on how to write down his legacy for his pregnant wife and soon-to-be-born son. Bascaramurty took on Reid's challenge, and *This Is Not the End of Me* is a portrait of Reid's final years, told with the curiosity of a journalist and the quiet generosity of a confidante. Reid's story—and Bascaramurty's telling—includes all of the messy, mundane, and, yes, funny moments that come with dying. It's a book that left me with big questions about the kind of friend, partner, and parent I want to be. As Reid shows, there's a lot of life to be lived, even while dying.

—  
*Ann Hui is a reporter with the Globe and Mail and the author of Chop Suey Nation: The Legion Cafe and Other Stories from Canada's Chinese Restaurants.*

## The Abortion Caravan: When Women Shut Down Government in the Battle for the Right to Choose

by KARIN WELLS



—  
The struggle to guarantee the right to abortion was long, and it is not yet over. In Canada, access remains patchy; in the United States, the right itself is now under threat with the Republican takeover of the Supreme Court well underway. *The Abortion Caravan*, then, describes a history that is still unfolding today. Karin Wells, a former CBC Radio documentary maker, tells the story of an era when tens of thousands of backstreet abortions were performed in Canada each year, causing infertility and death for many women. She follows the 1970 cross-country crusade in support of legalized abortion with eye-catching detail, tracking the protesters as they drove from Vancouver, picking up supporters en route, to storm Parliament Hill and dump a black coffin on prime minister Pierre Trudeau's doorstep. It would take eighteen more years before laws here were changed and abortion access was substantially improved in most provinces. Wells's descriptions of political action in the days before social media and #MeToo are at times witty and always fascinating.

—  
*Charlotte Gray is the author of eleven nonfiction bestsellers, including The Promise of Canada: People and Ideas that Have Shaped Our Country.*

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by Kelly Toughill

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CONVERSATION

## The Tragedian

BY BILLY-RAY BELCOURT

I am falling in love with a man.  
It has been three years since the last one.  
Summer after summer after long summer  
I retreated to my commune of nostalgia,  
my little lighthouse at the edge of the world.  
Each time, I hung my heart up on the door like a raincoat.  
Each time, I painted the walls a new shade of blue:  
hungry sapphire, hungry cobalt, hungry lapis.  
It was easy to pretend  
the sounds of the brutal earth  
weren't mounting to a foreign music around me.  
Now, when he touches me,  
I feel like a poorly folded photograph  
or a pile of imperfect orange rinds!  
Oh, to toss myself away! To be an obedient blur!  
To shiver in that empty blue room again!  
Why is it that love turns me into a tragedian?  
Into someone without a history of solace or fearlessness?  
*Here's an hour inside which to age gracelessly,*  
the wall clock seems to demand.  
I wish I knew how to be a person,  
but when he puts his animal mouth to my chest,  
I think of slaughter.  
I would be a beautiful wound to dance inside of—  
what this means is that, there are mornings  
in which I have to invent the concept of happiness.  
It is ugly, ugly work,  
and my hands are so calloused.



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## FIRST PERSON

# Root Cause

*Why my mother's cassava pie is more than a comfort food*

BY STEPHANIE WONG KEN

**T**HE WORD *HURRICANE*, I learned this past spring, comes from *huraca'n*, the Taíno word for the violent storms believed to have been created by a goddess and her two accomplices. Every year, the Taíno, an Indigenous people in what is now Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, weathered the destructive phenomena with a mixture of fear and respect. As I read further about Taíno survival practices, I was startled by their method of evading another devastating force—enslavement at the hands of Christopher Columbus, whose ships arrived on the shores of what is now Jamaica in 1494. Some Taíno killed themselves by ingesting cassava root, which, when eaten raw in large enough quantities, can produce deadly levels of cyanide. Suicide by cassava poisoning.

It took me a moment to process this history of a food so familiar to me. In my half-Jamaican family, cassava—a white-fleshed fibrous tuber with thick brown skin—is not a poison. It's the main ingredient in a fluffy dessert pie. It's the fried slices we eat with a garlic-and-vinegar sauce. It's essential family food to celebrate a milestone or mourn a death or acknowledge gathering at the same table. It's also the texture I crave when I'm feeling stressed or anxious, which right now is all the time.

We can safely eat cassava because the Taíno learned to soak the raw root meat in water to leach out the cyanide. Learning about cassava's toxic side, I grew to appreciate its dual power—a means of survival for the Taíno people, even if that meant not living.

My mother tells me that, in the Jamaica my parents grew up in, cassava,



also known as yuca, was considered too time consuming to prepare at home; there, it was and still is primarily used to make bammy, a starchy fried bread usually found in stores or restaurants. But, when my mother moved to New York City, in 1967, she discovered frozen, preshredded cassava in the ethnic aisle of the grocery store, and it soon became a household staple.

My mother got her recipe for cassava pie from a Filipina woman she met in New York, and the sliced, fried dish—yuca frita—is a Latin American way of preparing cassava she learned from a close friend. The Filipina woman did not write the pie recipe down, and my mother prepared many failures, in her New York apartment and then in our Florida house, before figuring out the right proportions of shredded cassava to coconut milk, butter, eggs, and sugar. Eventually, she shared the final instructions with the rest of the family, now spread out across Canada and the US, and the dish became ours.

Variations have since emerged: my late aunt liked to add shredded coconut, and sometimes I get stuck with the frozen whole cassava root I find in Asian grocery stores, which means I have to grate it at home and end up with a grainier

pie filling. But we all agree it has to be baked and served in a rectangular glass dish, which helps ensure an even top crust and maximizes the number of slices to feed a crowd—with enough for leftovers.

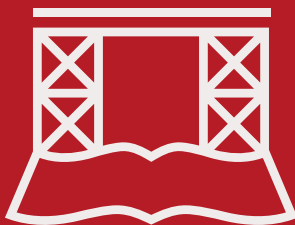
When I told my mother, this past fall, about how the Taíno poisoned themselves with raw cassava to escape capture, she surprised me with her response. “Everything is connected,” she said. She’d never really

spoken to me before about how she associated cassava with resisting colonialism. But learning about this moment in Taíno history helped her open up about how passing down her recipes became a way to preserve our family’s Jamaican heritage and work against the pressure to assimilate in every place she lived. “We just have to overcome,” she said. “We have to try to take two steps forward and no steps back.”

I often wonder whether cassava will ever become trendy, ending up like oxtail—a poor cut of meat that was transformed into something delicious by enslaved Africans and became a traditional dish in Jamaican cuisine. A few years ago, when oxtail began showing up on expensive dinner menus in Canada and the US, I rolled my eyes. I craved misshapen dumplings and chunks of meat on the bone in lieu of a plate of perfect gnocchi with slivers of undercooked tail treated like a garnish. But, with its ugly raw look and its starchy texture, cassava might just avoid a similar fate. It’s an ingredient that works best when it isn’t made to be anything other than what it is. 🍴

**STEPHANIE WONG KEN** is a freelance writer based in Toronto who has had her work published in *Catapult* and *C Magazine*, among other outlets.

— THE —  
BRIDGE PRIZE

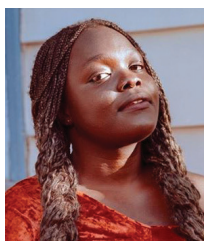


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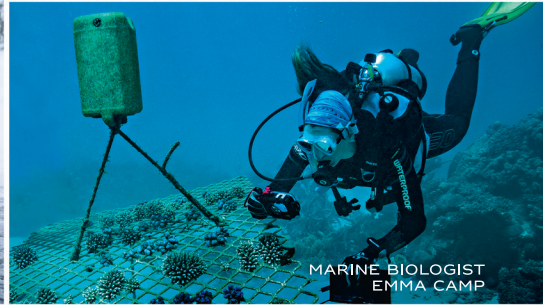
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