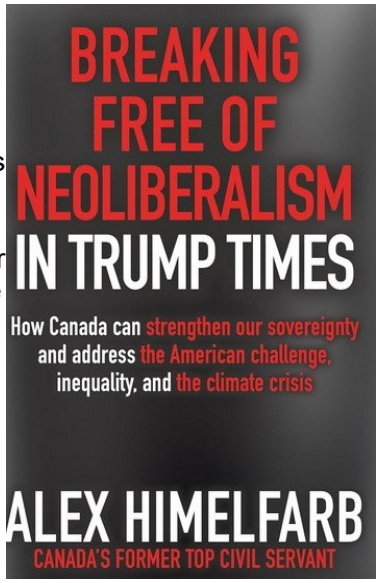
THINKING ANEW IN A TIME OF MONSTERS ~ by Jan Slakov

We're in a pickle, eh? The strongmen commanding huge militaries seem to think it's their prerogative to take over neighbouring nations, the Doomsday clock is so close to midnight it's hard to imagine it getting closer... and fascists have more and more control over "truth" and even how we think.



Does it make sense now, to take time to read books, to stop and think? Maybe. As Yoruba author/teacher/trans-public intellectual Bayo Akomolafe reminds us, "the time is very urgent - we must slow down."

This fall has seen the release of some landmark books, inviting Canadians in particular, to reflect on questions of sovereignty, economic and societal health and protecting what really matters.



After his remarkable public service career Alex Himelfarb has gone on to work to end homelessness and to help Canadians "Break Free of Neoliberalism" to paraphrase the title of his two recent books.
We would do well, I think, to heed his warning, that, "There is always a danger, in times of crisis, that the room for debate or criticism of our leaders — for democracy — narrows. In crisis we often accept decisions we would never otherwise accept. We become vulnerable to progress traps: decisions that seem to solve the problem of the day but create even greater problems down the road or lock us into a path that narrows our options. We need debate. Governments are at their best when challenged."

For the most part, the "Canada Strong" project seems to focus on classic progress traps, things like subsidizing dilbit pipelines and LNG infrastructure. Not only do such projects turn up the heat on climate chaos, but they involve contaminating water and contributing to the coffers of the very fascist operators who threaten our sovereignty and wellbeing. Or escalating military spending, even when we know that there's no way a Canadian military force could protect our democracy if troops were pouring across our borders. And, once again, a good part of that spending actually feeds the mechanisms that threaten our freedoms and opportunities for building health and resilience.

The smorgasbord of chapters in Bob Rae's *Reclaiming Canadian Sovereignty in a Ruptured World*, invites us to expand our understanding of sovereignty and to find a way forward that encompasses wisdom from many perspectives. Will we aim to protect what we have or to build what we want to become, asks Rodginie Dorcent. The first path puts us on the defensive, "always one step behind the challenge". the second entails meeting ongoing challenges, developing relationships, building capacity. It means having the courage to acknowledge failures as well as success, to face our history honestly. This is work that can't be outsourced. Using her metaphor of a hiker, you need to do the hiking; paying someone to fly you to the top of the peak won't build the strength you need to make it to the next one.

In his chapter on Canada in the "Age of AI", Stephen Wang contemplates what climbing the AI mountain could look like for us: "The relevant question is not whether Canada can out-build the hyperscalers. It cannot.... The more relevant question is whether Canada can retain agency over the terms on which AI reshapes its economy, institutions and alliances."

Similarly, recognizing that we could never out-gun large militaries that may threaten us, Richard Sandbrook invites us to develop our capacity for nonviolent defence. "Democracy", he says, "is both the means and the goal of nonviolent defence." If we want to protect the values and fundamental freedoms that enable

democratic governance, we need large scale citizen engagement and the strength that comes from creating the we that we want to become, as Rodginie Dorcent suggested.

For nonviolent defence to work, we'll need to change our ways of thinking. One of Canada's leading proponents of nonviolence, Basir Bita, wrote about "what Trump teaches us that no other contemporary president could have". When we contrast the "horrifying depths of cruelty, domination, and destruction" figures like Hitler, Stalin or Nero have shown to the kindness, compassion and healing of other leaders we learn about "what we are capable of *becoming* — beings who can choose... compassion over cruelty, and healing over harm."

We've grown up under a worldview where it is taken for granted that the way to meet our needs is to transform "natural resources" into commodities that can be sold or bought. People more closely connected to the Indigenous traditions that guided humanity through millennia of living sustainably invite us to re-connect with our ability to live in "intimacy with a cosmos that is just as alive as we are" [Akomolafe]. For a "how to" manual on "*Life, Money and Illusion: Living on Earth is if we want to stay*", I highly recommend the work of Mike Nickerson, author of the book bearing that title, and of the sustainwellbeing.net website.

In doing this worldview shift work, we face a major challenge. Disunity can be a real threat to democracy and to our ability to protect our sovereignty. But change implies challenging a status quo that's failing us and those challenges can prompt resistance, resistance that may threaten at least the perception of unity. Max Cameron's *Divided We Fall* helps us see that divergent views need not undermine democracy. His description of lessons learned from getting students engaged in dialogue through the Institute for Future Legislators that he co-founded was particularly inspiring for me. And Mike Nickerson's insights on "Tapping Our Collective Potential" through productive dialogue can also help us find our way.

This article has given me the opportunity to highlight some of the people and ideas that brighten this difficult time.

I wonder if the divergent modes of thinking that John Ralston Saul described as characteristic for Canada might actually apply to our world in general. In his book on Lafontaine and Baldwin, he wrote:

"At key historic moments every society burns into its unconscious the patterns for agreement & disagreement. These become the civilizational model & remain in place for centuries. the spring of 1849 was the defining moment for modern Canada. On one side was the European monolithic model, the colonial party, loyal to whatever empire was dominant, provided that this loyalty brought them power, income & psychic comfort - power & income without real responsibility. Like all colonial elites they were pessimistic about their own capacity as elites to think and act in a manner appropriate to this place. On the other side was a democratic movement that sought to develop new approaches to the public good. In Canada that meant loyalty to an unprecedented idea of complexity, which in turn meant that everyone, leaders in particular, would have to discipline themselves through restraint - restraint as encouragement to a civilization of complexity involving *the other*. Each Canadian crisis since 1849 has been a replay of these opposing patterns." [Jan's underlining]

Charlie Angus is not the only one who sees Canada as a leader for the resistance that, in the final analysis, must be global, not just national. While the losses we are living through are heart-breaking, the fact that so many people are engaging in work towards what has been called "The Great Turning" can't help but inspire us all to do our part too.

Some sources linked to this article:

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