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Sunday, September 17, 2006



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Illustration by Julie Morstad

Roy Romanow is exactly right when he says, “Canada has a legacy that provides it with a compass...a story that should allow it to navigate its future course with confidence and grace. If we become gripped with amnesia and pretend we don’t have that narrative, we will lurch about, creating only the illusion of national progress.” I would contend that conservatism and neo-liberalism converge in their need for amnesia or wilful ignorance when each calls for market forces to prevail

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for the less well off while seeing government and communities as competitors for goods and services created by the private sector.

Romanow's suggested narrative recalls that nation-building in Canada need be no more complicated than people realizing that they need to work together for the common good, both in their communities as well as in government. Healthy communities and good government are not necessarily in competition with our individual interests. Ideally, they are expressions of who we are. Romanow asks us to remember that the Canadian narrative is a story about setting high standards and meeting them, not about setting our standards lower when we fail.

John Stapleton

Toronto, Ontario

Roy Romanow responds:

"A House Half Built" was written as encouragement to a public that wants and needs more. The response to date has been inspiring. The notion of difference is certainly not a new phenomenon in Canada—diverse peoples progressively building a nation together is one of Canada's most recognizable features. The concept of shared destiny describes our historical commitment to digging deeper for meaning in our place and to being something bigger than the sum of our differences.

New challenges over time raise new questions. How can we maintain a commitment to a fair and balanced Canada in the context of growing complexities and a smaller world We grapple with big questions through casual

(2 comments)

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Postmodern Choirboy

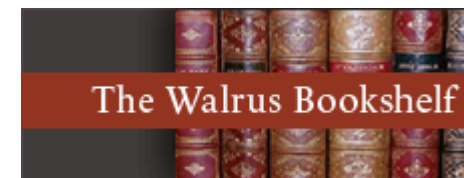
Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay on his elegies for a lost natural self

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chats with neighbours, by attending a budget meeting at city hall, or by following mass media. Our political leaders and their policies play a central role in fomenting this debate. In many ways, it is how governments orient themselves in the public arena that ultimately shapes the character of our conversations, and too often we are led down the path of “divide and conquer” instead of being engaged in ways that would teach us more about what Canadians have in common.

This truncated discourse is increasingly pervasive. Ministers haggle over fiscal imbalances instead of engaging Canadians about the purpose of federal transfers. Discussions over health reforms begin with the promise of transparency and consultation but wind up being conducted behind closed doors. The promise of a carefully negotiated child-care agreement is abandoned under the guise of increasing individual choices.

It should come as no surprise that as policy-making becomes detached from our history and the very public it is supposed to reflect, Canadians lose faith in the possibility of a shared destiny. But Canadians still dream of public institutions that can reflect our shared values of fairness, opportunity, and respect, and that also strike a balance between the individual and society.

Perhaps a little less dreaming and a bit more demanding is in order. To invoke the words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, “come, my friends, ‘tis not too late to seek a newer world.”

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