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In Search of a Canadian Utopia

A MAP OF THE WORLD must include Utopia, because that is the one country at which humanity is always landing. No sooner does it land than it looks out and sees a better country, and sets sail again.

Every enlightened and active-minded person is to some degree a Utopian. He pictures to himself the political, social and industrial conditions under which he should like to live, and, at least in some small degree, he tries to realize those conditions.

Few persons in the Western World give in to the thought that things have been already settled for them. We know that things accepted today as part of our way of life were once merely dreams, and we look forward to having our own dreams come true.

The word "Utopia" was first used by Sir Thomas More in 1516 as the name of a far distant island on which, according to his story, there existed an ideal commonwealth. It has made its way into the dictionary as meaning "a place, state or condition ideally perfect in respect of politics, customs and conditions."

Some people may think it more or less childish to read utopian literature, but one of the great benefits is this: it helps us to break through the barriers of conventional thinking and see things fresh, from new points of view. There is, in the more serious utopian literature, a great treasury of creative ideas and useful practical devices.

"What is Utopia?" is a legitimate and perhaps a useful question to raise. Some of the writers portray its citizens as living leisurely lives, with an abundance of the necessities of life, and enjoying the advantages furnished by gadgets. That thought was in keeping with the physically hard times in which the books were written. But the utopian idea has something for the mind and spirit, too.

The essence of any civilization is found in its sense of values, demonstrated in its preferences, its moral commitments, its aesthetic judgments, its loyalties, its conception of the good life, its standards of excellence, its measures of success, and what it teaches its young people about the things for which men shall live.

The Golden Age

Where do we get the idea of a Golden Age? Writing in the eighth century B.C., a Greek shepherd-poet described the five ages of the world. First was the golden race of mortal men, then silver, then bronze, then a race of heroes, and finally our own, the race of iron. We have picked up the phrase to designate a period of stability and harmony.

King Alfred pictured the Golden Age of England as a far-off time in which "no one had yet heard of Viking ships of war". A Chinese philosopher saw in it a time when "one village might look at the smoke rising from the chimneys of another nearby without envy or rivalry".

It is evident that many of the ancient fables of the Golden Age had foundations in fact. We find vestiges of them preserved in the present time, and echoes of their idealism in our minds. The utopian brings together the best ideas of the Golden Age and modifies them to fit the new environment.

We have, in fact, enough ideas lying around us and proffered to us to build a dozen utopias, but they are a hodgepodge of undigested thoughts. They have one thing in common, despite their diversity of form: the desire for a fuller, more interesting, more satisfying life. In seeking this, they range from Aladdin's magic lamp, which gives us everything we want at once and free of cost and work, to the prophet's cry for reformation of life and character.

The first utopian we know of who was in a position to put his ideas into practice was the Pharaoh Akhenaten. Within a crescent of hills, remote from the everyday life of Egypt, he built a new city devoted to emancipating the human spirit in religion, art and ethics. It was the most striking change in any ancient state.

Several centuries later a king of India, Asoka, introduced idealism which ranged all the way from planting shade trees to founding hospitals, from sending missionaries to the aborigines to appointing officers to administer charities at home; from provid-

ing for the education of women to cultivating medicinal herbs. As H. G. Wells says: "More living men cherish his memory today than have ever heard the names of Constantine or Charlemagne."

For every man who has had the authority to give reality to his utopia, there have been thousands who could only plan, propose and exhort.

Plato, who had an uncanny knack of being right, is still referred to by the advanced thinkers of today although he wrote his *Republic* 2,300 years ago. Plato set his utopia in an inland region with no facilities for maritime trade and little economic activity except subsistence farming. He points up the prosperity which results when pious, law-abiding, industrious pioneers develop a civilization in peace.

The first utopian of what we might call the beginning of our present scientific age was Francis Bacon, who wrote *New Atlantis* in 1626, professing an aggressive faith in the liberating role of science. About the same time, Thomas Campanella, an Italian, took bits and pieces of preceding utopias and built them into *City of the Sun*. Shakespeare's ideas of utopia appear in *The Tempest*, where Gonzalo would "...with such perfection govern, sir, to excel the golden age", and in *King Henry VI*, where Jack Cade promises a realm in which there shall be no money, but all shall eat and drink at the king's expense.

By the nineteenth century people were forecasting plastics, synthetic fabrics, combine harvesters, radio, television, automobiles and air conditioning, and incorporating these in their utopias. Henry Thoreau rejected such pictures of a mechanized civilization, and stood out for simple living.

A Massachusetts author, Edward Bellamy, wrote *Looking Backward* in 1888, making his utopia of the year 2000 a single industrial unit, with compulsory work service for everyone.

There were, too, less pretentious utopias. Robinson Crusoe found one where he was allowed to live in an exotic setting without any of the puzzling responsibilities of a wife and children. Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposed to try the experiment of human perfectibility on the banks of the Susquehanna River, where his little society was to have combined the innocence of the patriarchal age with the knowledge and genuine refinements of culture. He remarked in an essay: "we at length alighted on the firm ground of common sense from the gradually exhausted balloon of youthful enthusiasm."

Utopias and us

These Utopias, and others, were based upon the idea of progress, or, at the very least, a change from a worse to a better state. Mankind has risen from his former lowly condition just because of them. Individuals stepped out of the routine rut of their existence and attempted to do something that had not been accomplished before.

A new state arises out of the needs of mankind, but someone has to be first to see the needs. He gets an idealistic vision of what seems to be a good society, though such social conditions may never have existed, and then compares that apparent perfection with the imperfect reality of present society.

To assume that either man or his environment has changed so much that lessons of the past no longer apply is unrealistic. How can we appreciate freedom, opportunity, and luxury without an appreciation of the spent hope and sweat and blood and treasure that went into gaining them? How can we be sure that our way is the best way unless we have learned about the blind alleys into which our forefathers wandered, and the great array of things that might as well not be tried again?

There are lessons, too, about how the importance of movements which in their own time meant little became the rallying ground for advancement in a later age. Consider Magna Charta, the Great Charter forced from King John after the revolt of the barons in 1215. When Shakespeare wrote a play called *King John* he completely omitted what appears to us to have been the most dramatic event in that monarch's life. Five centuries after King John the Charter became the corner-stone of liberty for the English-speaking world.

The thing to do with utopian dreams is not to give them up but to test them. Some dreams have undeniable grandeur and nobility, but upon sober examination they turn out to be impractical. Others, like the idealized code written aboard the *Mayflower* during the long slow passage from Plymouth to Massachusetts in 1620, have vitally affected millions of people through many generations.

Consider James H. Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, published in 1656. Arthur E. Morgan points out in *Nowhere was Somewhere* that it has almost lost its status as a utopia because it has been so widely used in making actual constitutions. For example, when congressmen in the United States argue for the separation of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the government they are going over the arguments of *Oceana*.

Because of the advances made in the Western World, there is not much to be learned from those utopian creations which dealt with the elemental needs of men, such as abundance of food, shelter and clothing; freedom from oppression; freedom from excessive toil, and opportunity for self-expression.

These material utopias, now largely matters of fact, release men from immediate preoccupation with material wants, but they leave more profound problems of life still unsolved. Are we attacking these? Alfred North Whitehead thinks not: "No period of history has ever been great or ever can be that does not act on some sort of high, idealistic motives, and idealism in our time has been shoved aside, and we are paying the penalty for it."

In Canada today

It will not do for us in Canada to take too petty a view of our stature. To people in many other lands Canada seems to have nearly reached the utopian ideal. If poverty has not been completely abolished, at least a larger proportion of our population lives in comfort than in any previous civilization. We have, through the forty-hour work week, the leisure eulogized by utopian writers. We use food and clothes so lavishly that we seem, to other people, wasteful. Our amusements, our educational opportunities, our ability to travel, and our freedom from hard labour . . . all these surpass the most golden dreams of the ancient utopians.

But it would be disastrous to our future if we were to settle down and say "Now we are all right". We must continue to cultivate our garden.

We have an excellent foundation in the values to which we give allegiance tabulated for us by Professor George S. Counts:

1. Our ethical standards derived from the Hebraic-Christian faith;
2. Our adoption of the humanistic spirit of the Greeks and of the Renaissance, which emphasizes the dignity of man;
3. Our confidence in the scientific method of hypotheses tested by instruments as the safest path to truth;
4. Our adherence to the Roman and Anglo-Saxon rule of law to provide channels for peaceful change in society;
5. Our democratic faith in liberty, equality and fraternity, which came to us from the eighteenth century philosophers and the French Revolution.

Confederation

All of these principles are incorporated or implied in the charter of Confederation. The men who framed it were well aware of the need for political union in order to preserve this country's civil and political liberties, but they did not place a political yoke around our necks. Instead, they reached out to the future, to a fuller, richer, and more various life of all the provinces through co-operation centrally attained.

The hundred years since they framed their charter, based upon everlasting principles and incorporating the practicalities of their day, have been years of testing.

It is no easy task to govern in Canada, either in federal parliament or provincial legislatures. Many people of sound judgment and good ability are needed, and every voter has a say in choosing the wisest men.

The purpose of those who govern, as Plato had the merit of seeing, is to make the safety and interest of their citizens the great aim and design of all their thoughts and endeavours, without ever considering

their own personal advantage; and so to take care of the whole collective body of the nation as not to serve the interest of any one party to the prejudice or neglect of all the rest.

There are many definitions of what is the interest of the people, but for Canadians it may be taken to mean this: the right of every man to enjoy, in accordance with his aptitudes of character and mentality, the material and spiritual opportunities that nature and science have placed at the disposition of this nation.

Before we can enjoy the perfection of a government like that, we need to educate all our people so that they are qualified to select the best leaders. The duty to vote is a duty to equip oneself to vote. Wise decisions cannot be extracted from blank ignorance.

There is a collateral duty upon those who proffer themselves for office. How have they trained themselves to deserve confidence in their judgment? Leaders hold their positions only on sufferance, and they must justify themselves by other means than appeals to inheritance, possession or popularity.

Some hindrances

There are three failings which interfere with the development of a nation: prejudice, a passion for security, and nationalism.

A utopia may exist though each of its parts has a diversity of operations, but it cannot exist without unity of spirit.

Co-operation is the basis of utopian life, as it is the basis of democracy. There is no "ism" that will add one inch to our advance toward a better Canada.

This means that we need a broad tolerance, a seeing of the good points on both sides of a question. This does not mean keeping always in the middle of the road. The middle way may have a part of the vices of both extremes and none of their virtues. As someone put it, when you walk in the middle of the road you are likely to be run over by both lines of traffic instead of by only one.

To be tolerant is not to be indifferent, and it is incompatible with ignorance. It is a positive and cordial effort to understand another's beliefs, practices and habits, without necessarily sharing or accepting them.

Mutual understanding is based on the acceptance of our widely differing characters and ways of looking at and interpreting the world. The Emperor Hadrian excoriated races who had lived side by side for centuries without having "the curiosity to get to know each other, or the decency to accept each other".

Many inventors of utopias have made them intolerably dull, because their main preoccupation was with security and ease. They are like people who build a golf course which is all green, without fairway, rough, bunkers or hazards.

The self-respecting person can stand a world without a fence around it. He needs opportunities of adventure, of trying for himself. He knows that if he stops thinking of government as it should be, and thinks only of what it does for him, he loses control of it by becoming its beneficiary and client.

Pope Leo XIII said in his Encyclical of May 1891: "If any there are . . . who hold out to a hard-pressed people freedom from pain and trouble, undisturbed repose, and constant enjoyment, they cheat the people and impose upon them, and their lying promises will only make the evil worse than before."

When preoccupation with security begins to dominate human life, the scope of human life begins to be diminished. It is right that the state should be a machine fit to serve men, but with the least possible risk of crushing them.

A broad view needed

The third wrecker of utopian dreams is the spirit of nationalism, whether it be of the city, province, state or nation. Many people believe that nationalism is the basic ill of our age, but it is not a new disease. The great Greek war was a struggle between the Union of which Athens was the mistress and the states' rights group of which Sparta was the head. It was insistence upon the rights of the province in preference to those of the nation that caused the destruction of Greece itself.

Many useless words are spoken, many fruitless efforts are spent, and many needless enmities are aroused, by sectional divisions over public questions. Rabbi Robert Gordis put it forcefully: "No greater peril threatens the survival of the race than nationalism, man's total absorption in his own ethnic or political group."

The opposite to rampant nationalism is the voluntary association of men and women for the preservation and cultivation of a cherished body of ideals, practices and values.

This seems to lead into consideration of world-wide relationships, and no country can ignore them. We often develop a sense of bitterness and frustration at the failure of world organizations to achieve lasting peace and harmony, but we never quite give in to the feeling that the goal should be abandoned.

Through example and the force of our representation in international affairs we should strive to bring back order, scruple and principle into society. Thereby we enhance our own prospect of building the ideal commonwealth we see in our mind's eye.

No country, big or little, can sail serenely down the stream of time looking only at the brave bow wave it is cutting, or at the picturesque wake it is leaving. Even a utopia must pay attention to the surrounding shores. To paraphrase a great Roman: "So far as we

are Tom, Dick or François, our country is Canada; but so far as we are men, it is the world."

We recall one great moment in the late war, the moment in 1940 when England suggested that France unite with her and that they become one people under law; but it slipped away. Things became less desperate, and the moment was lost.

Unless peace is to depend on a balance of terror, the world needs something of the spirit of the Commonwealth. It exists for the help and comfort of its members and as an encouragement to all who want political freedom and friendship with their fellow men.

What to do

We should take a look, once in a while, at what has been accomplished instead of brooding over what we have not yet succeeded in doing. We can transfer thought of the Golden Age from the past to the future, exchanging a disillusioned view of human destiny for one that is optimistic. It is the cult of deprecation that endangers our social stability and holds up our efforts to progress. It is better, said Confucius, to light one small candle than to curse the darkness.

Utopia is, above all, a place of and for educated people. If we are to build a Canada nearer to our hearts' desire, as Archimedes offered to move the world, we need, like him, some ground to stand on and a sturdy fulcrum. Education provides these.

As long ago as 1944 the Canadian Education Association was discussing with school authorities the possibility of some organized plan for making education a greater force for national unity. The plan envisaged: (1) exchange of correspondence among students and teachers in different parts of Canada; (2) exchange of teachers of different provinces; (3) encouraging teachers to attend summer school in another province.

Education with its wings spread widely will help to build social sense, which includes the answer to the critical problem that all utopians have to face: how shall our larger utopia keep from being neglected through every one's concern for his little private utopia? Only educated men and women can think of the broader scene.

Utopia is not made by talking, but by learning, thinking, planning and working. Many a proposed Utopia had the fatal flaw of excusing and justifying the slackening of men's efforts to straighten out their immediate world. Just to propose a beautiful future is not equivalent to its realization.

We are concerned to better today's conditions; we are equally charged with planning to improve them tomorrow. Our grandchildren will be fortunate indeed if we have envisioned a great pattern and laid a few foundation stones.