

Intelligence MEMOS



From: William B.P. Robson
To: Fellow Canadians
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Re: **A PROFESSIONAL NAG PAUSES TO REFLECT**

We at the C.D. Howe Institute devote much of our daily attention to criticizing poorly conceived and ineptly implemented policy in Canada. As we should. That's our job. And our governments keep us all too well supplied.

When William Watson asked me to contribute a [column](#) to the National Post on good things Canadians should celebrate and do more of, however, it prompted recollections of people outside Canada asking us how Canada ranks as a place to live, work, invest, or locate a business. For me, those questions trigger a happy 180-degree turn. The professional nag steps back and the Canada-booster takes over. As we welcome 2020, here are three ways we stand out.

First on my list – first on so many people's lists – are Canada's people. The main reason why Canadians find their country such a good place is – other Canadians. We raise our children well. Our elementary and secondary schools help most of them get a good grounding in the knowledge, skills and habits they will need later in life. Our post-secondary institutions instruct a startlingly high share of our population. The critic in me reflexively notes there could be improvements in curriculum, student-oriented funding, and accountability for results to make Canadian education better yet. But when it comes to developing talent, just about any other country would readily change places with us.

Complementing our homegrown human capital is our remarkable success in attracting human capital from abroad. Our immigration system highlights economic opportunity, supported by a points system that favours people relatively likely to succeed in Canada. The result is an economic success story, which, in a virtuous circle, keeps political support for economically oriented immigration high. In another virtuous circle, successful immigrants themselves attract a steady stream of new ideas, skills and entrepreneurial energy. We would do even better if our high taxes and the teeming opportunities in the US did not induce so many people to emigrate. Still, on balance, Canada is in the top rank in attracting talent.

Next on my list would be our concern about the economic, social and physical environment we will bequeath to future Canadians. This might seem an odd emphasis for someone whose professional criticisms focus so much on government debt, underfunded public-sector pensions, and other signs of how current beneficiaries of government spending enrich themselves at the expense of future generations. But those criticisms resonate in Canada. Why? Because we care. We want to be good stewards for those who will come after us. That fiduciary duty shows in Canadians' dislike of government deficits and unfunded liabilities, and in our embracing of low inflation. These are never-ending battles, but people in most other countries can only wish the good guys had won as frequently as they have here in Canada.

Third on my list – something we tend to forget until reminded by people with experience in less favoured countries – is our above-average expectation for good governance. We want probity on the part of public officials and we react with outrage and determination to fix the problem when we don't get it. We have our scandals and skulduggery – the battles to uphold good standards in public life also never end – but corruption is relatively rare in Canada, and the majority of people who enter our public life do so for good reasons.

My own professional criticism focuses on transparency and accountability in budgets and management of public funds. Those criticisms also resonate. Slowly – too slowly, says the nag in me – but also surely, fiscal transparency and accountability are improving. People everywhere need to push for better accountability from public officials, whether in the areas I have mentioned – education, immigration, sustainability of public programs, and fiscal transparency – or in others ranging from policing to infrastructure to healthcare. Happily, in Canada, we not only push for better, we can push with confidence that we will get results.

Looking ahead to 2020, we need to keep the pressure up. We nags will keep fulminating – identifying problems, raising concerns, and urging progress. Even in mid-criticism, though, we should take a moment to look at Canada as others see it. This is a great country in which to locate a business, a great country in which to invest, a great country in which to work, and a great country in which to live. Our people, our fiduciary sense and our high standards in public life are invaluable assets – and excellent foundations for an even better future.

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