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4 BUILDING AN ADAPTABLE COUNTRY

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9 Avant de commencer, j'aimerais remercier l'Institut de recherche en politiques publiques  
10 de m'avoir donné l'occasion de m'adresser à vous ce soir, et à vous féliciter pour  
11 le succès de cette conférence.

12 Je veux aussi remercier l'École de la fonction publique du Canada de m'avoir donné  
13 l'occasion de devenir le chercheur invité Jocelyne Bourgon au cours de la dernière  
14 année.

15 I am a professor of government, and in my research over the last few years, my main  
16 interest has been explaining the survival of large-scale political systems.

17 People have been building large-scale political systems for thousands of years, and the  
18 one thing that almost all of them is they they no longer exist.

19 The only survivors are the hundred or so countries of significant size that exist today, and  
20 most of these countries are relatively new and fragile. Canada is actually one of  
21 the older states existing in the world today.

22 My main argument is that the survival of political systems hinges on a quality that I will  
23 call adaptability, which I will explain in more detail in a moment.

24 That has been the subject of my research as the Jocelyne Bourgon Scholar over the last  
25 few months. I am also working on a book, *The Adaptable Country*, which if all goes  
26 well will be published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 2024.

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28 Let me explain what I mean by adaptability in government.

29 An adaptable system is one that is capable of transforming itself to meet new  
30 challenges. This transformation involves a shift in ideas, as leaders and citizens  
31 develop new understandings about national priorities, and also the renovation of  
32 institutions so that they are able to advance those priorities.

33 Adaptability is different than resilience. While resilience is about preserving the  
34 essential functions of a system in periods of stress, adaptability involves  
35 restructuring the system so that it can perform new functions.

36 Adaptability will be essential if governments want to retain authority and legitimacy in a  
37 turbulent and often dangerous world. Already this century, we have seen dramatic  
38 shifts in culture, technology, the global economy, geopolitics, and climate. And we  
39 know that more change is coming in decades ahead.

40 Countries that are not nimble will not thrive -- and some will not survive -- under these  
41 new conditions. National success will require skilled leadership and a flexible state --  
42 one that is capable of rebuilding itself to undertake new tasks.

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44 An adaptable country must perform four functions:

45 First, the system must be good at *forward thinking*. The governmental system as a  
46 whole should be vigilant about potential long-term threats to important national  
47 interests.

48 Second, the system must be good at *inventing strategies* for responding to long-term  
49 dangers. It is not enough to be aware of threats; the system must be capable of  
50 thinking creatively about how to manage them.

51 Third, the system must be good at *legitimation of strategies*. By this I mean the work of  
52 building broad political support in favor of one response or another.

53 And finally, the system must be good at *execution* -- that is, translating a strategy into  
54 action by restructuring institutions and practices.

55 Countries are not all equally good at performing these four functions. Many have  
56 collapsed because they ignored looming dangers, or because they could not build  
57 consensus on the need for change, or because they simply could not put new ideas  
58 into practice.

59 Even today, many people are skeptical about the adaptability of liberal-democratic  
60 federations like Canada and the United States. They claim that systems like ours are  
61 prone to short-term thinking, polarization, and gridlock.

62 These critics suggest that authoritarian systems like China will do better in coming  
63 decades. We can think of this century as an experiment, testing which version of  
64 governance -- the China model or the Western model -- is better at sailing through  
65 rough waters.

66 One of our challenges in Canada is to make the case for our decentralized approach.

67 We want to show that open and free societies are also capable of responding nimbly  
68 to new strains and stresses.

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70 There are many people who see Canada as a country that resists change and is not very  
71 good at adaptation. I disagree with this view. I would argue the Canadian track  
72 record on adaptability over the last forty or fifty years is impressive. In fundamental  
73 ways, Canada is a different country that it was forty years ago.

74 For example, we have made the country bigger and more diverse, by adding 15 million  
75 people. From the point of view of 1983, that is like adding another Ontario and  
76 another Quebec.

77 We have also empowered Canadians by giving more protection for individual rights.

78 We have transformed -- and broadly speaking, limited -- the role of government in  
79 steering the economy.

80 We have redefined the meaning of Canadian federalism, by shifting power from Ottawa  
81 to provinces and territories, and beginning the work of acknowledging the rights of  
82 Indigenous peoples.

83 And we have adjusted the role of every institution in Ottawa -- the House of Commons,  
84 the Senate, the Supreme Court, ministerial offices, and the public service itself.

85 None of these transformations happened by accident. They were all the result of  
86 deliberate policy choices. We have been engaged in a massive renovation project,  
87 with the aim of making our country a better place to live.

88 Not all countries have been equally flexible. In particular, I would argue Canada has  
89 made bigger changes to its system of government than has the United States over  
90 the same period of time.

91 But I would observe that many of these changes involved the diffusion of power within  
92 the Canadian system. Canada is a more complex and loosely jointed system than it  
93 was forty years ago.

94 I said a moment ago that one of the vulnerabilities of Western systems is the  
95 coordination of effort among many loosely joined parts. In other words, how do we  
96 get everyone in the orchestra to play the same music? In Canada, that vulnerability is  
97 more substantial than it was forty years ago.

98 ---

99 I have some ideas about why we were good at adaptation in the late twentieth century.  
100 One of our advantages was that we worried constantly about the country's future. We  
101 did not take national survival for granted.

102 And this preoccupation with survival had positive effects. It counter-balanced the short-  
103 sightedness that is said to be an inherent problem of democracies.

104 Worry about survival led us to invest a lot of time in forward thinking and strategy-  
105 making. Among other things, we relied heavily on royal commissions and  
106 independent advisory councils to provide a road map for the country as a whole.

107 Similarly, we invested a lot of effort in creating a space in which Canadians could talk  
108 with one another about choices facing the country.

109 Academics sometimes talk about the need for democracies to have a healthy "public  
110 sphere" -- that is, a space in which citizens can engage constructively in debate about  
111 national priorities.

112 In a country like Canada, maintaining a healthy public sphere is hard work. But in the  
113 20th century we never took the public sphere for granted. Every time a new  
114 communication technology came along, we took time to consider how it was likely to  
115 help or harm our capacity to talk with one another.

116 We also learned how to make a decentralized, loosely connected system work well. We  
117 built the hardware to do this, which involved sophisticated systems of  
118 intergovernmental relations. And we installed the software, which consisted of a  
119 political culture that emphasized negotiation and accommodation.

120 And finally, we were skilled in transforming new ideas into action. We began with a  
121 huge advantage over our American neighbors, because we inherited a parliamentary  
122 system of government.

123 But we also amplified that advantage by carefully developing highly effective  
124 bureaucracies that relied on dedicated professionals rather than political appointees.

125 I do not mean to suggest that our country ran perfectly in the late twentieth century. But  
126 there was a distinctive Canadian approach to governance that addressed the  
127 potential pitfalls of the Western model, and improved our ability to anticipate and  
128 respond to dangers.

129 Many aspects of this distinctive approach can still be seen today. But as I look at the  
130 way Canadian politics and government has developed in this century, I see four  
131 threats to adaptability within the Canadian system.

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133 The first of these threats is a reversion toward short-term politics. Political leaders and  
134 citizens are more likely to be caught up in the politics of the moment, and less likely  
135 to be focused on problems further away on the horizon.

136 One explanation for our drift toward short-termism is simply that decision-makers are  
137 busier and more stressed. The flow of information has increased and it is much  
138 harder to keep on top of events. Officials do not have as much time to reflect on  
139 long-term challenges.

140 The changing character of politics has also encouraged short-termism. Canadian  
141 elections are more competitive than they used to be, and minority governments more  
142 common. As a result, political leaders are more focused on the next election.

143 Political competition has also encouraged parties to put more emphasis on party  
144 platforms. More than before, we expect parties to make detailed promises during  
145 campaigns, and deliver on those promises while in office.

146 One result of this new style of "platform governance" is that parties play a bigger role in  
147 policymaking, which they are largely unequipped to perform competently. Another is  
148 that governing has become preoccupied with delivering on promises within one  
149 electoral cycle.

150 There is another crucial consideration that has encouraged short-termism. We have  
151 abandoned mechanisms that once provided a counter-weight to short-term thinking.  
152 In the 1990s and early 2000s, we shut down advisory councils that looked at long-  
153 term trends. Similarly, we no longer create royal commissions to explore national  
154 challenges. In short, we have disinvested in forward thinking.

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156 The second threat to adaptability has to do with the health of our national conversation  
157 about politics and governance. The Canadian public sphere, that critical realm of  
158 democratic deliberation, is breaking down, largely because of another wave of  
159 innovations in communication technologies.

160 These innovations have had two effects. First, they have eroded the boundaries of the  
161 Canadian public sphere. Foreign corporations play a much larger role in shaping  
162 communications among Canadians. And Canadian citizens are more likely to be  
163 caught in echo chambers or filter bubbles that cross national borders. One result is  
164 the creeping Americanization of political discourse in Canada.

165 Technological change has had a second effect on the public sphere in Canada. It has  
166 corroded the quality of public conversation. The negative effects of new media are  
167 now well-documented. Social media platforms reward impulsivity and provocation,  
168 and perform poorly at distinguishing between real news and fake news.

169 Professional journalists find it increasingly hard to make a living in this new  
170 environment, and this also contributes to the decay of democratic deliberation.

171 The country now has the same number of journalists as it did forty years ago, despite  
172 the growth of population, government spending, and economic activity.

173 The balance between journalists and spin-doctors in our society has shifted too. In  
174 1987, Canada had one full-time journalist for every four people employed in  
175 advertising, marketing, and public relations. Today, the ratio is one to twelve.

176 The threat to the public sphere is not just from technology. Canadians have limited  
177 knowledge of their own history, their system of government, and problems that are

178 likely to confront Canada in coming decades. Even when we do talk with one  
179 another, we are not well prepared to make good choices about looming challenges.

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181 The third threat to adaptability relates to conversation among our country's leaders. We  
182 can see a deterioration in the quality of dialogue among our country's leaders that  
183 parallels the decay in public conversation I noted a moment ago. Conversations  
184 among national leaders seem less civil than they once were.

185 A fundamental problem is the failure of national leaders to meet routinely to discuss  
186 national problems. Of course, provincial and territorial leaders meet regularly in the  
187 Council of the Federation, established in 2003. But this body is not a true Council of  
188 the Federation, because it does not include the Prime Minister or representatives of  
189 Indigenous peoples.

190 What is lacking is a forum in which all national leaders meet routinely to discuss items  
191 of common concern. This is the practice in other federal systems like Australia,  
192 India, and the European Union, and also in international bodies like the G7, which will  
193 hold its annual leaders' summit in Canada in 2025.

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195 The fourth threat to adaptability has to do with the health of the Canadian public  
196 service. A country cannot be adaptable if its public service is incapable of taking new  
197 ideas and translating them into action efficiently.

198 Many observers of the federal public service worry that it is developing a risk-averse  
199 culture, but I am not sure that this is the right diagnosis. I see risk-aversion as a

200 symptom. The underlying problem is the steady build-up of controls relating to the  
201 work of the public service over the span of fifty years.

202 Most of these controls have been adopted for good reasons, with the aims of making  
203 the public service a better place to work, and improving accountability. But we have  
204 not kept track of the mounting cost of complying with all these controls. Sometimes,  
205 the cost of new controls has exceeded any benefit that the controls were intended to  
206 produce.

207 At the same time, we have increased the number of independent watchdogs  
208 responsible for policing the public service. And in a polarized environment,  
209 controversies over perceived rule violations become more likely. All this contributes  
210 to risk-aversion.

211 So far I have been talking about administrative controls on the public service. We have  
212 also added a new layer of political control. We often talk about "exempt staff" in  
213 Ottawa, but I will talk about the political service instead.

214 The political service is a new institution. It did not exist forty years ago. Today, it has  
215 almost as many people as the Department of Finance. This is another layer of  
216 control that encourages risk-aversion.

217 In the past, Canada has often established royal commissions to conduct periodic  
218 reviews of the public service, and determine whether controls still make sense. As I  
219 said earlier, royal commissions are no longer popular in Canada. The result is that  
220 we have an ongoing accumulation of administrative and political controls, but no way  
221 of doing of a proper spring cleaning.

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223 I've discussed four threats to adaptability -- a shift to short-term politics, a decline in the  
224 quality of public deliberation, a similar decline in discussions among national leaders,  
225 and an accretion of administrative and political controls within the public service.

226 Overall, I see a shift towards a mode of governance that is more reactive and impulsive,  
227 less effective in finding distinctively Canadian solutions to national problems, and  
228 less effective in translating ideas into action.

229 These are serious problems. But I also believe that there are some simple reforms that  
230 may help to restore adaptability.

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232 First, we can invest more substantially in forward thinking, just as we did in the late  
233 twentieth century, through mechanisms like the Macdonald Royal Commission on  
234 Canada's Economic Prospects.

235 We should also adopt a recommendation made by the Lortie Commission on Electoral  
236 Reform thirty years ago: the establishment of publicly funded party foundations.

237 Party foundations now operate in many European countries. They function as think  
238 tanks for parties, and have proved to be effective devices for improving the quality of  
239 party policymaking and public debate.

240 Second, we should be more focused in our efforts to protect the health of democratic  
241 deliberation within Canada.

242 I recognize that the federal government has already taken steps to protect democratic  
243 deliberation, and that it is being pressed to do more.

244 But let me make a general observation about the approach that we are taking today. We  
245 seem to be fighting spot fires rather than focusing on the main blaze. We have

246 controversies about electoral interference, the state of journalism, hate speech,,  
247 funding for the CBC, disinformation, civic literacy, historical awareness, and so on.  
248 But often we do not name the large problem that connects all these smaller  
249 controversies – that is, our capacity to function effectively as a democracy. To put it  
250 another way, we do not have a generally understood vision of what it is we are trying  
251 to defend.

252 Similarly, there seems to be no department or office in Ottawa that takes a systematic  
253 view of how all these smaller controversies fit together.

254 Let me compare our present situation to where we were after the terror attacks of  
255 September 2001. In that case, we named a new central threat to our national  
256 interests and reorganized government to address it directly. We took bits and pieces  
257 from across government and combined them within new departments and agencies  
258 that were focused on the new threat.

259 That may be what we need to do today. We need to concentrate our attention and effort  
260 toward the objective of preserving a healthy Canadian democracy.

261 There is precedent for this. A century ago, populists made a similar case for  
262 government action to protect the public sphere. They did this in the name of freedom  
263 -- that is, the freedom of Canadians to make informed choices together about the  
264 future of their country. There is a compelling case for a similar populist program in  
265 defense of Canadian democracy today.

266 Let me suggest a third reform, which would improve conversation among our national  
267 leaders. Canada's Council of the Federation ought to be a true Council of the  
268 Federation, including the Prime Minister and representatives of Indigenous peoples.

269 Moreover, meetings of our national leaders should be regular events, based on a  
270 commonly agreed agenda. To put it another way, we should apply the logic of G7  
271 meetings to the governance of our own country.

272 Finally, I endorse the proposal recently made by Professor Donald Savoie, that there  
273 should be a royal commission to study the condition of the federal public service.

274 A royal commission is the only way of assuring that this subject gets the time and  
275 attention it deserves.

276 The commission should look specifically at the web of controls that have accumulated  
277 over decades. And it should also look at the role of the political service, and not just  
278 at the career public service.

279 ---

280 Let me conclude by telling you about a survey that was conducted by Leger Marketing a  
281 few months ago. Leger asked Canadians between the ages of 15 and 40 about their  
282 views of the future.

283 Almost seventy percent said that they anticipated major upheavals in the foreseeable  
284 future. Almost sixty percent believed that governments were not doing anything  
285 about these dangers, and that these governments were betraying young Canadians  
286 by their failure to plan.

287 The same proportion of respondents said that they felt helpless in the face of society's  
288 problems. That feeling of helplessness contributes to ambivalence about having  
289 children, launching careers and businesses, and making other long-term  
290 commitments.

291 My own view is that these respondents have got it right. They are right about the  
292 magnitude of the risks facing this country in coming decades.  
293 And they are right that governments are not working hard enough to anticipate dangers,  
294 foster public conversation about options, build agreement about the path forward,  
295 and preserve our capacity to act in a timely way.  
296 In short, we are not paying enough attention to the essential quality of adaptability.