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

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

I am a professor of government, and in my research over the last few years, my main interest has been explaining the survival of large-scale political systems. People have been building large-scale political systems for thousands of years, and the one thing that almost all of them is they they no longer exist. The only survivors are the hundred or so countries of significant size that exist today, and most of these countries are relatively new and fragile. Canada is actually one of the older states existing in the world today.

My main argument is that the survival of political systems hinges on a quality that I will call adaptability, which I will explain in more detail in a moment.
That has been the subject of my research as the Jocelyne Bourgon Scholar over the last few months. I am also working on a book, The Adaptable Country, which if all goes well will be published by McGill-Queen’s University Press in 2024.

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Let me explain what I mean by adaptability in government.

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

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

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

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

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An adaptable country must perform four functions:
First, the system must be good at *forward thinking*. The governmental system as a whole should be vigilant about potential long-term threats to important national interests.

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

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

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

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

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

These critics suggest that authoritarian systems like China will do better in coming decades. We can think of this century as an experiment, testing which version of governance -- the China model or the Western model -- is better at sailing through rough waters.
One of our challenges in Canada is to make the case for our decentralized approach. We want to show that open and free societies are also capable of responding nimbly to new strains and stresses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

None of these transformations happened by accident. They were all the result of deliberate policy choices. We have been engaged in a massive renovation project, with the aim of making our country a better place to live.
Not all countries have been equally flexible. In particular, I would argue Canada has made bigger changes to its system of government than has the United States over the same period of time.

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

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

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

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

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

Similarly, we invested a lot of effort in creating a space in which Canadians could talk with one another about choices facing the country.
Academics sometimes talk about the need for democracies to have a healthy "public sphere" -- that is, a space in which citizens can engage constructively in debate about national priorities.

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

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

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

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

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

Many aspects of this distinctive approach can still be seen today. But as I look at the way Canadian politics and government has developed in this century, I see four threats to adaptability within the Canadian system.
The first of these threats is a reversion toward short-term politics. Political leaders and citizens are more likely to be caught up in the politics of the moment, and less likely to be focused on problems further away on the horizon.

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

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

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

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

There is another crucial consideration that has encouraged short-termism. We have abandoned mechanisms that once provided a counter-weight to short-term thinking. In the 1990s and early 2000s, we shut down advisory councils that looked at long-term trends. Similarly, we no longer create royal commissions to explore national challenges. In short, we have disinvested in forward thinking.
The second threat to adaptability has to do with the health of our national conversation about politics and governance. The Canadian public sphere, that critical realm of democratic deliberation, is breaking down, largely because of another wave of innovations in communication technologies.

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

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

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

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

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

The threat to the public sphere is not just from technology. Canadians have limited knowledge of their own history, their system of government, and problems that are
likely to confront Canada in coming decades. Even when we do talk with one another, we are not well prepared to make good choices about looming challenges.

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

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

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

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

Many observers of the federal public service worry that it is developing a risk-averse culture, but I am not sure that this is the right diagnosis. I see risk-aversion as a
symptom. The underlying problem is the steady build-up of controls relating to the work of the public service over the span of fifty years.

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

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

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

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

In the past, Canada has often established royal commissions to conduct periodic reviews of the public service, and determine whether controls still make sense. As I said earlier, royal commissions are no longer popular in Canada. The result is that we have an ongoing accumulation of administrative and political controls, but no way of doing of a proper spring cleaning.
I’ve discussed four threats to adaptability – a shift to short-term politics, a decline in the quality of public deliberation, a similar decline in discussions among national leaders, and an accretion of administrative and political controls within the public service. Overall, I see a shift towards a mode of governance that is more reactive and impulsive, less effective in finding distinctively Canadian solutions to national problems, and less effective in translating ideas into action. These are serious problems. But I also believe that there are some simple reforms that may help to restore adaptability.

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First, we can invest more substantially in forward thinking, just as we did in the late twentieth century, through mechanisms like the Macdonald Royal Commission on Canada’s Economic Prospects. We should also adopt a recommendation made by the Lortie Commission on Electoral Reform thirty years ago: the establishment of publicly funded party foundations. Party foundations now operate in many European countries. They function as think tanks for parties, and have proved to be effective devices for improving the quality of party policymaking and public debate.

Second, we should be more focused in our efforts to protect the health of democratic deliberation within Canada. I recognize that the federal government has already taken steps to protect democratic deliberation, and that it is being pressed to do more. But let me make a general observation about the approach that we are taking today. We seem to be fighting spot fires rather than focusing on the main blaze. We have
controversies about electoral interference, the state of journalism, hate speech, funding for the CBC, disinformation, civic literacy, historical awareness, and so on.

But often we do not name the large problem that connects all these smaller controversies -- that is, our capacity to function effectively as a democracy. To put it another way, we do not have a generally understood vision of what it is we are trying to defend.

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

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

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

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

Let me suggest a third reform, which would improve conversation among our national leaders. Canada’s Council of the Federation ought to be a true Council of the Federation, including the Prime Minister and representatives of Indigenous peoples.
Moreover, meetings of our national leaders should be regular events, based on a commonly agreed agenda. To put it another way, we should apply the logic of G7 meetings to the governance of our own country.

Finally, I endorse the proposal recently made by Professor Donald Savoie, that there should be a royal commission to study the condition of the federal public service. A royal commission is the only way of assuring that this subject gets the time and attention it deserves.

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

Let me conclude by telling you about a survey that was conducted by Leger Marketing a few months ago. Leger asked Canadians between the ages of 15 and 40 about their views of the future. Almost seventy percent said that they anticipated major upheavals in the foreseeable future. Almost sixty percent believed that governments were not doing anything about these dangers, and that these governments were betraying young Canadians by their failure to plan.

The same proportion of respondents said that they felt helpless in the face of society's problems. That feeling of helplessness contributes to ambivalence about having children, launching careers and businesses, and making other long-term commitments.
My own view is that these respondents have got it right. They are right about the magnitude of the risks facing this country in coming decades. And they are right that governments are not working hard enough to anticipate dangers, foster public conversation about options, build agreement about the path forward, and preserve our capacity to act in a timely way. In short, we are not paying enough attention to the essential quality of adaptability.