

Intelligence MEMOS



From: William B.P. Robson

To: Canadians Contemplating 2021

Date: January 5, 2021

Re: **LET'S DROP THE 'WE CAN'T GO BACK' POST-COVID FANTASIES**

Of all the COVID-inspired clichés of 2020, “we can’t go back to how we were before” gets my vote for most trying.

Taken literally, it is empty. We can’t undo the deaths, restore students’ lost instruction, give young people the first jobs they didn’t get, erase the huge debts, enjoy the travel and human contact that didn’t happen. No, we can’t go back to 2019. That is too bad.

Taken as an exhortation – “we shouldn’t go back to how we were before” – it is too often a prelude to magical thinking, a great leap to some environmental, economic or political nirvana previously out of reach. That is silly. Sick people who were never athletes can dream of completing a triathlon. But their first task is to recover. In the same way, post-pandemic, Canadians need to repair the damage COVID-19 has wrought on our health, our economy, and our governance. To go back, in fact, to where we were.

Granted, where we were 12 months ago was well short of perfect. And I’m as prone as anyone to saying “we shouldn’t go back” when we are talking about healthcare and other services delivered (or not) with faxes, paper, and sitting in waiting rooms. Or long-term care that was nothing of the kind. Or employment practices and office arrangements dating from the 1950s. In those areas, and many others, we don’t want to go back, and we won’t.

But if “we can’t go back” implies the pandemic has somehow cleared the way to a world where we emit no carbon dioxide and use no plastics, to a world where everyone has equal incomes and wealth, or where the constraints and frustrations of representative government have somehow disappeared, then we are in the realm of magical thinking. COVID has put new demands on our resources, hit harder many people who were already struggling, and undermined accountability in many of our most important institutions. No harm in ultimately aiming higher, but our immediate tasks are down-to-earth. Getting back to shaking hands, socializing, live entertainment, working together safely. Yes – going back to how we were.

The tension between eliminating single-use plastic products – a current obsession in Ottawa – and the need for better hygiene, healthcare and facilities for the elderly is a stark example of a challenge the pandemic has intensified. Whatever we think of plastics as an environmental challenge, COVID has clearly heightened their utility. Single-use plastics are critical in protecting patients and healthcare providers, while addressing the disaster in long-term care will require more of them.

Redistribution of income and wealth has attracted more magical thinking. The obstacles to universal income policies related to targeting, dependency and tax cost did not disappear when the pandemic made us all poorer – they got worse. Interrupted educations, lost jobs and depleted savings – those effects disproportionately affected many people who were already struggling to get the skills, opportunities and financial security other Canadians take for granted. Our top priority should be precisely to get these people back on track.

When it comes to governance and public affairs, 2020 was a bleak year. Governments responded to the pandemic with measures that often rested on weak legal, logical and scientific foundations. Key mechanisms for public accountability fell by the wayside. Many governments presented budgets late; the federal government never presented one at all. Parliament has not functioned normally, or at all, for most of the year. In these areas, too, we would be much better off if we just got back to 2019.

So for 2021, how about we get back to before a time when we kept hearing “we can’t go back”? Yes, let’s push ahead on virtual healthcare and digital delivery of services, on better long-term care, and on new ways of working. But let’s acknowledge that COVID has made us sick, and our top priority is getting well again.

Protecting the environment was easier when we were richer. Providing opportunities to marginalized people was easier when there were more jobs. Holding our politicians and officials accountable was easier when they did less ruling by decree.

I, too, want to make progress in 2021 and beyond. Let’s start by dropping the most vacuous policy slogan of 2020. Sometimes, getting back is exactly what we need to do.

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