

SEMINAR SUMMARY PAPER: Wednesday 15 August 2007



**'Aligning Glasgow to the 21st Century:
Learning from Alberta's Experience'**

Ruben Nelson

Overview:

The 21st century will be so fundamentally different from the 20th that our existing institutions, perspectives and relationships will be inadequate to guide us through it. Room to develop new perspectives is required and Ruben shared with us what has been taking place in Alberta to try and rise to this challenge.

Summary:

In introducing his talk Ruben encouraged us both to be sceptical and to develop our own sense of the territory which needs to be covered, rather than to be confined by his.

He began by reminding us that the human world is comprised of multiple perspectives and that a key role in understanding the 21st century is to internalise as many of these as possible to inform the creative process of developing new perspectives. He described his work as that of establishing a global network of people keen to learn how we might live fulfilling lives in unprecedented circumstances. This work was becoming increasingly crucial as the activities of our species are now having global effects. How we conduct ourselves in this century may make the difference between peace and prosperity and war and decline. He emphasised that it was not the earth's survival which was at stake but that of humans.

He highlighted this by suggesting that most Albertans' dreams for the 21st century were that it should be like the 20th but with all the problems ironed out and the holes filled in with money. For example in education, the desire was for a seat for your child rather than a different conception of what education might achieve. However, just as the 20th century had fundamentally changed the perspectives of the 19th, the 21st was going to be radically different from the 20th.

The key question, critical insight and responses

In Ruben's view the initial key question is 'just how different will the 21st century be?'. He elaborated on this by asking whether the path that we are currently on will be sufficient to navigate the 20th century or whether we need to make a new one. His view is that the current path is not sustainable and that the more quickly we can begin to move to a new path, the less damaging the adaptation will be. He suggested that our difficulties in this are compounded by the difficulty which democratic consensus has in seeing deviation. In times of stability this is not such a problem, but in times of change such as ours, it creates difficulty because it tends to keep us tied into our cultural expectations long after it is appropriate to be so.

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This he described as overshoot, suggesting that overshoot has serious consequences as the longer it continues, the more difficult it is to change to paths more appropriate for the emerging circumstances. He illustrated this for Canada by suggesting Europeans never set foot in Alberta until industrial culture had established itself in Europe. Therefore all of Alberta's European experience is rooted in an industrial culture and so it is not surprising that aspirations are expressed in the hope of better and better versions of this. It is difficult to imagine anything else. This may be a case of investing too much in yesterday and not enough in tomorrow.

The critical insight which he developed from this realisation is to suggest that: *"The world needs at least one jurisdiction openly committed to co-creating a society/economy deeply aligned with the 21st century"*. He suggested that the role of this jurisdiction was to act as a miner's canary and provide examples and experience of how to approach the 21st century before overshoot becomes uncontrollably dangerous.

The response to this insight was to ask: *"Why not Alberta?"* and since 1997 a small group of people committed to discovering how Alberta might flourish in the 21st century has been involved in developing an infrastructure and actions to answer the key question and develop a critical mass of leaders to engage consciously with the conundrum of adaptation to the 21st century.

In 1997, the 'Capitalising on Change' project was established to explore Alberta's readiness for the 21st century. This project which lasted until 1999 and principally involved 600 Albertans in 16 table roundtable discussions in four cities over a two year period. Each met between twelve and fifteen times. There were also seven province-wide plenary sessions in which knowledgeable people shared their experience. These gatherings started out to address three questions:

- Do you experience our time as a time of profound societal change?
- If so, is this change more like gravity or friendship (i.e. is it inevitable or amenable to human effort)?
- If like friendship, what support system would we in Alberta require in order to notice, face, explore and respond with creative courage to the challenges and opportunities of profound societal change?

This single body had many roles, from a community of interest to a project executive and ultimately this was unsatisfactory as it tried to be too many things to too many people. Consequently it was disaggregated into three units in 2002. These were:

1. The Alliance for Capitalising on Change which acts as a community of interest making it possible for 200 members and 4,000 participants to meet, discuss and exchange thoughts about the future of Alberta.
2. The Creating Tomorrow Foundation which supports and encourages those in public leadership roles to quietly learn and discuss issues which they might find it difficult to address in public.
3. Foresight Canada which conducts research and practice and enables professional networking through workshops, a web presence, etc.

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Concluding, Ruben suggested that key strengths were the ability to hold and understand the futures space in an inclusive and learning manner. He suggested that this attracted and held quality, committed people alongside resources. There was enough profile and experience in this group to make exploration and door opening possible. Thus while the going is slow and the capacity to manage the increasing complexity of the organisations and their fields is tested, it at least offers the prospect of understanding the 21st century well enough to make joint effort to flourish in it.

Participants' written input

As part of the afternoon's proceedings participants wrote down their immediate responses to what Ruben had said and used their notes as the basis for roundtable conversations, before concluding in plenary. The written responses fell into three categories:

- What were the most important things you heard that we must pay attention to in Glasgow?
- What questions and challenges do you have about what you heard?
- Any other points?

This short summary does not pretend to be a comprehensive treatment of these written notes, but rather is a summary of main themes, ideas, concerns and questions. The main themes from each of the three sections are summarised below.

What were the most important things you heard that we must pay attention to in Glasgow?

The most common response which emerged was the idea that the 21st century is not simply an extension of the 20th. This idea was widely accepted in responses and related to other significant participant observations. In this regard participants were taken with the concept of overshoot – the idea that behaviours and policies continue for long after they are appropriate.

For example, many participants suggested that if the above is true then it follows that business as usual, more of the same, is unlikely to be sufficient for Glasgow to flourish in the 21st century. Participants also responded very positively to the idea that the future was capable of being made, not simply something that would happen, and that alternative futures were possible.

Some participants took this discussion of agency down to the level of themselves and other individuals and questioned where responsibility for action lay. This in turn led to a series of observations and questions from participants about how we go about discerning what these alternative futures might be. Based on what Ruben had said, participants were asking where the capacity/infrastructure might be for the kind of multidisciplinary, open-ended, multi-perspective conversation for the co-creation of the future in Glasgow.

A few participants suggested that the idea of cultural entrapment made the task of building emergent capacity a difficult and long term one. Questions about 'possibility' seemed to be of more significance than 'innovation within the existing framework'.

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Some also suggested that, in looking for the creative edge, deviation and change are to be welcomed and encouraged. This was linked to the view that we ought to spend more time looking for deviations, and building the capacity to research, develop and explore emergent perspectives on these, thereby enabling the City to hone and sharpen its relationship to change and uncertainty.

Overall, then, participants felt it important that in Glasgow we pay greater recognition to change and the need to develop capacity to address aspirations in new and emerging conditions.

What questions and challenges do you have about what you heard?

The main questions and challenges focused on the range, diversity and scale of engagement in the processes which Ruben described for Alberta. The concern was mostly about how to get beyond elites and elitism and the usual suspects. A key strand of this theme revolved around the concern that if diversity is not factored into the conversation and the building of capacity, then the opportunity for robust and lasting transformation is at least diminished and at most thwarted.

This was accompanied by a series of questions about relationships of various kinds, for example between external and internal factors on different scales: from the relationship between global change (external) and Alberta (internal), to individual consciousness (internal) and behaviour (external). Alongside these questions, participants also raised others about how to deal with opposition, how to develop the courage to let go of current practice, how to maintain interest in a long term process, how to include the voice of the poor and who needs to be influenced and how.

Other points?

The main themes expressed here raised questions about how to motivate and engage at the level of hearts and minds and how to better focus on looking outward – ie Glasgow in Scotland in the World – and also towards the views and perspectives of others. How does the city transcend ‘business as usual’ and make room for multiple perspectives and engage in energising ways?

A response from Ruben Nelson

In responding, at the end of the afternoon, to the points which participants raised based on these perspectives, Ruben suggested that it was important to establish an infrastructure capable of doing this work, so that it did not rely solely on the effort of one person. He acknowledged that his own background was unusual in Canada which raises questions about what kind of people development we need in order to do 21st century work and about where the Rubens are in Glasgow.

On the issue of engaging beyond an ‘elite’ he argued that this was an open question for him, based on what we think the work of society is and who does what. The analogy he used was that of water supply, most people are happy if the water which comes from the tap is wholesome and do not feel the need to know about cholera or engineering. It paid to think carefully about who you were asking to be involved in what kind of exchange.

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In relation to practical effort he gave some examples but reiterated his view that this was not about doing something different with the same consciousness, but about changing consciousness. The challenge for Glasgow is: is Glasgow interested in this kind of work? If so, how will it join with interested others?