



Prime Minister Mulroney and President Reagan at the G7 Summit in Toronto in 1988, where leaders “strongly welcomed” the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, a truly big idea. *Policy* archives photo

A Lament for the Age of Leadership

Robin V. Sears

The years between the two world wars and the last 40 years of the 20th century produced a pantheon of visionary leaders who were neither daunted by wicked problems nor confounded by big ideas. Eisenhower, Kennedy, Monnet, Reagan, Gorbachev, Trudeau, Mulroney, Mandela and others in their league saw the world as a topography of potential transformation; every crisis an opportunity for change. Today's leaders aspire, sometimes against formidable odds, to adequate management. Our challenges demand more.

If you have ever driven across Sydney Harbour on its massive and magnificent bridge you are the beneficiary of a determined political leader's very big idea. Equally, Toronto subway riders crossing the Don Valley on its even more elegant bridge have another visionary leader's big idea to thank.

It was typical of the best leaders in the inter-war and post war years of the 20th century to fight for improbable ideas, spend years overcoming resistance to them, to endure the sneers of defeated

opponents, and then be vindicated for their courage—often long after their passing—by grateful future generations.

The Sydney Harbour Bridge, the signature for decades of Australia's largest city, began in a sense as a bridge to nowhere—now eight lanes, two railway tracks a footpath and a cycleway. John Bradfield, the visionary "Chief Engineer of Sydney Harbour Bridge", first proposed a bridge in 1914, and lived to ride the first train across it in 1932. Today, the road section of the Harbour Bridge is named the Bradfield Highway in his honour.

Similarly, the Bloor Viaduct across the Don Valley realized the vision of city fathers who foresaw the growth of Toronto. After years of debate and five years of construction, the Bloor bridge opened in 1918 at a cost of \$2.5 million. Nearly a century later, it still links the east to the west side of Toronto, with five traffic lanes and two bicycle paths on the upper level, and Toronto subway trains on the lower level.

In Montreal, where they had talked of a subway for decades, Jean Drapeau built the métro in only four years from 1962-66. Then he used the earth from the subway tunnels to build two islands in the middle of the St. Lawrence River that hosted Expo '67, the most successful world's fair in history.

Dwight Eisenhower's vision, in the 1950s, of a continent-spanning network of super-highways was a big idea that transformed the way in which Americans saw their country and bequeathed dramatic economic growth and mobility for generations. Today, the Interstate Highway System, the backbone of US travel and commerce, bears his name. C.D. Howe rammed through a pipeline from Alberta to Ontario in less than 10 years from conception to opening—admittedly employing methods that helped defeat his government and would have raised the eyebrows of Crown prosecutors today.

John F. Kennedy, in a speech at Rice University in 1962, famously said:

2014 has seen the first breach by a global power, Russia, of the ironclad observance of post-war UN agreements against the use of force to seize territory. This breakdown in the centre of Europe is disturbing, but probably not uncontrollable. That Russia needs the world more than it needs the Ukraine will be the inevitable choice they will soon face.

"We choose to go to the moon." And America did, "in this decade", as he promised. In Berlin in 1987, Ronald Reagan called on Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall." And together they ended the Cold War. Pierre Trudeau promised constitutional change in the 1980 Quebec referendum, and delivered it in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982. Brian Mulroney transformed the Canadian economy, and Canada-US relations, with the Free Trade Agreement of 1987 and the Acid Rain Accord of 1991. These were leaders with big ideas, who delivered on them.



"We choose to go to the moon," John F. Kennedy declared in his famous commencement address at Rice University in 1962. And America did, as he promised, "in this decade." Wikipedia photo

But it is not merely the ability to conceive and drive to completion massive infrastructure projects or societal change that distinguishes those years

and those leaders from today.

When Paul-Henri Spaak, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, a Belgian and two French politicians, sat down in a café in war-ravaged Brussels to conceive of the partnership that became the European Union, it took a visionary confidence that could have fairly been seen as delusional. The Marshall Plan—the tidal wave of US dollars and assistance that pumped up European post-war recovery and drove down Soviet imperial ambition—has been studied endlessly, but despite calls for similar assistance to other devastated regions, has never been replicated.

The list of grand, visionary follies is not short, but the legacy of world-changing achievements is longer. From the creation of the global network of institutions that guide international economic policy and security management, to previously inconceivable binding agreements on nuclear weapons, the International Atomic Energy Agency regimen, chemical weapons, the Law of the Sea and that governing Antarctica, the world of the 21st century is less violent, more tolerant, less fragile economically and militarily, and more committed to sustainability than any in human history.

But that foundation, those networks are now aging—products of an era that is quickly fading. Today's leaders have failed to build on the acid rain and ozone agreements of 25 years ago, in battling climate change. Canada's leadership on the abolition of land mines failed at the finish line, as did efforts to control the spread of conventional weapons, a deadly trade that is breaking all records once again.

Today's leaders managed the 2008-09 financial crisis. They put a plug in the hole, but systemic financial control mechanisms acceptable to the whole world required leadership they did not have. Bilateral trade agreements continue to multiply, but the transformational trade agreements that were the legacy of the GATT have eluded its WTO successor, with the Doha Round facing collapse once again.

And most distressing of all, 2014 has seen the first breach by a global power, Russia, of the ironclad observance of post-war UN agreements against the use of force to seize territory. This breakdown in the centre of Europe is disturbing, but probably not uncontrollable. That Russia needs the world more than it needs Ukraine will be the inevitable choice they will soon face. It seems unlikely, however delusional Russia's new czar has become, that he will be permitted by his own citizens to turn Russia into a North Korean autarky—though many Russian billions and many thousands of young lives may be squandered before he is brought back to reality, or forced from his palace.

Political managers such as Stephen Harper, Barack Obama, and virtually every European head of government who trembles at the prospect of major risk taking, long-term thinking or strategic gambles seem collectively ill-suited to this sweeping set of new threats and fundamental challenges.

China is demonstrating on many fronts its unwillingness to accept the old order, challenging it in the South China Sea, in the Security Council, and in an array of bilateral conflicts. Henry Kissinger's warning on China, now nearly two decades old, seems more relevant today than it did post-Tiananmen Square: "We may only

hope that the statesmen of the new century are more successful at accommodating a rising and unsatisfied new power into the international order, than were their forefathers at the beginning of the last century—else the 21st century risks becoming as tragic and bloody for many of the world's citizens as was the 20th."



Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and the Queen at the Proclamation of the Constitution Act, with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms on Parliament Hill, April 17, 1982. Wikipedia photo

It is not clear that the world can be as confident of an end to the disorder sweeping the Maghreb and the Middle East, as it might be in re-establishing an agreed order in Europe or Asia. There the forces of unreason are rampaging successfully across a series of failing states from Tripoli to Cairo, to Sinai, Syria, Iraq and possibly once again Afghanistan. Despite the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars on both development and death by drone, and at the cost of tens of thousands of lives, the spiral into chaos does not appear to be slowing down.

In total, it is an alarming menu: unparalleled security challenges on the ground and in cyberspace by non-state actors from North, West and the Horn of Africa to the Maghreb to Central Asia, now heavily armed and flush with oil dollars; a collapse in political will and confidence in the democracies due to the military humiliations of the past decade fol-

lowed by the economic collapse and a still shaky recovery; on top of two very unsatisfied nuclear powers testing the boundaries of international order in Europe and Asia.

Those political managers such as Stephen Harper, Barack Obama, and virtually every European head of government who trembles at the prospect of major risk taking, long-term thinking or strategic gambles seem collectively ill-suited to this sweeping set of new threats and fundamental challenges. However delusional his power grab may be, no one can accuse Vladimir Putin of lacking the confidence of a grand vision: the recreation of the Russian Empire of the great czars. Chinese leaders may not be as foolish in their ambition, and are demonstrably far more effective at playing several chess games with several partners simultaneously, but the sweep of their game plan crosses decades, not an election cycle.

The idea that François Hollande or David Cameron is this century's version of the great French presidents and British prime ministers of the post-war era would be laughable if it weren't so horrifying. Angela Merkel soars in the current European political firmament, but only by contrast with her peers, not her German chancellor predecessors, such as Helmut Kohl, the father of German reunification. Barack Obama, the political vessel into which so many poured so much hope, has revealed himself to be timid to the point of dysfunction when big choices need to be made. They may be competent managers—though even that bar sometimes appears too high—but genuine political leadership is something else entirely.

We face challenges that will require visionary leadership to meet on a dozen policy files in every corner of the globe. Voters in many places have demonstrated their willingness to support leaders committed to transformational change. We even know the outlines of the required solutions in many cases: further trade liberalization, especially in services; real carbon pricing and faster moves to non-carbon energy; changes in

membership at the top tables like the IMF and the Security Council; global financial services regulation and governance that includes developed and developing nations; and perhaps most urgently, new enforceable security agreements and partnerships.

We face challenges that will require visionary leadership to meet on a dozen policy files in every corner of the globe. Voters in many places have demonstrated their willingness to support leaders committed to transformational change.

What will it take for a new generation of leaders to demonstrate the vision of a 21st century Laurier, combined with the steel of an FDR, and the breath-taking skill at reconciliation of a Mandela? Human history suggests that those leaders will emerge, unpredictably and without warning—often when and where the skies are darkest. In 1985, no one could have predicted South Africa's liberation and multi-racial democracy a decade later.

Is Hillary Clinton capable of rising above her underwhelming incrementalism to offer tough global leadership of the world's only "indispensable" nation? Is Tom Mulcair or Justin Trudeau capable of bringing Canada together again after a decade

of dither followed by another decade of deliberate division?

And who will re-bottle the rapidly spreading scorpions now threatening the lives of millions of Arabs, Africans and Asians, and soon the world?

For our children's sake, let us dearly hope they come soon. **P**

Contributing Writer Robin V. Sears is a principal of the Earncliffe Strategy Group. robin@earncliffe.ca

November 24–26, 2014
Ottawa Convention Centre, Ottawa, Ontario



GenomeCanada

gairdner
LES PRIX CANADA GAIRDNER AWARDS

Genomics: the Power & the Promise

How does our environment impact human health and natural resources at the genomic level? How can genomics help leverage Canada's traditional resource sectors while preserving the environment? Explore these questions and more with world-renowned genomics experts and visionaries from academia, industry, government and media.

Register today for the full conference or for the November 25th Gala Dinner only at:

powerandpromise.cvent.com/2014.



#powerofgenomics

@GenomeCanada @GairdnerAwards