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Calgary is approaching the upper limits of size at which citizens can still feel the tension between a big city and the land around it. Another two or three hundred thousand people and the city dweller will find himself pretending that the land around, however dramatic, is a mere backdrop, a place for pleasure or relaxation, but not a meaningful reality.

You might say Calgary is a metaphor for Canada as a whole, its people largely jammed into southern cities with European densities, while all around lies the distant shadow of the world's second largest country.

The sign of this risky state is that few of us realize, in our wealth and urban savvy, that a critical percentage of our national GDP still comes out of the land. And those commodities in turn have to be processed, refined, milled, pulped and transported. Calgary talks of oil, but to that you must add every form of mining, pulp and agriculture. Without these commodities we are a poor country. And yet, commodities are historically associated with economic fragility. Right now their value is up. It is often down. And the producer has difficulty influencing the price.

Lip service and a few billion dollars are invested against the future uncertainties of commodity dependence, but if you walk through the streets of our cities, including Calgary, you won't sense much conscious concern about that fragility. The recent rise in commodity markets has inflated our wealth and our dependence, but I see few signs of care being taken to lessen the risks.

Each time I find myself feeling comfortable about our urban wealth, I remind myself of Buenos Aires and its commodity financed glories. In the 1920's, Argentina had a higher per capita standard of living than Canada. What went wrong? Their economy slipped into highly concentrated holdings. These in turn undermined the citizenry in their role as active players, destabilized their individual social and economic ambitions and encouraged an ever larger rich-poor divide. The outcome was the rise of populism – something we can see growing in Canada – followed by a general social collapse, followed by an economic collapse.

Canada has almost always been able to protect itself from such dangerous social imbalances thanks to an unusual combination of egalitarianism and individualism. Of course we have had our risky and unpleasant moments, but crises are relative. And compared to our neighbours, friends and allies, we have managed to avoid the collapses, to say nothing of the persistent violence, civil wars and democratic breakdowns which have overcome them all.

That capacity to establish and maintain a fragile balance was first put in place by Louis LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin almost 160 years ago. That tradition of restraint in a society which was already multi-lingual, multi-racial, poor, northern, and yes, dependent on commodities, spread over the decades, across the continent, taking different forms in different regions. What we forget now is that in three short years – from 1848 to 1851 – the Great Coalition of LaFontaine and Baldwin put in place hundreds of laws which still shape the way people live everywhere in Canada, including Alberta.

The pre-eminence of trial by jury, the independence of judges, the professional civil service, universal public education, public universities, public roads, and of course democracy, just to name a few, are all products of that government. If you dig deep enough, the Calgary tradition of volunteerism owes something to that tradition.

Compare that energy, that ethical courage, that imagination and originality to so many of our recent governments at different levels, awash in money, yet ready to chop away at the public good, to trade off an inclusive view of society in favour of the financial advantage of a few.

I must admit that over the last few years I've been amazed by the facility with which our society has come to accept serious levels of poverty, exclusion and homelessness. Our new wealth has brought a certain gloating. Richer people, it seems, have the right to better artificial hips. After all, golf must be played. While a farmer or rancher with smaller or poorer holdings, who needs his hip for his work, must quite naturally, it seems, settle for the lesser model.

I am one of those for whom Calgary is part home. I love it and love its sense of community and creativity. Yet I feel the city has still to make up its mind about what its wealth means. Not just today, but long into the future. I remember clearly Peter Lougheed's sense of the risks that such an economy carried and the need to build something more complex, more inclusive. That willingness to look openly at what worked and what didn't was a great contribution to the province, but also to the country.

The city of justice is an idea stretching back to Athens, to Saint Augustine, to the renaissance Italian city states. It revolves around the idea of citizens prepared to build the public good by embracing one central philosophical idea: we must try always to imagine the other. The condition of the other is the mirror of our own condition. Poor societies like that of 1848 understood the role of empathy only too well. Rich societies have often found this more difficult.

And that is Calgary's test. Charity has its role. But the central need is not to give charity to those who have fallen to the wayside. The need is to apply ideas which emerge from egalitarianism combined with responsible individualism. We know that that approach can produce the sort of inclusion which a healthy society calls justice.