CANADA 2068: UNKNOWN UNKNOWNS, SQUARED AND CUBED

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In February 2002, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was lampooned by many people not nearly as smart as he for his trifurcation of all knowledge into: things we know (or at least think we know), things we know we don't know ("known unknowns"), and things we don't know we don't know ("unknown unknowns"). In fact, it bespeaks wisdom and humility that were tragically lacking in his department's invasion of Iraq one year later.

What do we know about the world in 2068? We have a decent idea of the number of people 50 years and older who will be alive, barring nuclear, environmental, biological or other disaster. We at least know the upper bound on the numbers of such people, since they have all been born by now or very soon will be. Is there much else we know? Fifty years is not much more than half the expected life of a typical Western newborn, yet for prediction it remains a very long time. Over half a century, unknown unknowns dominate, thus limiting the usefulness of forecasting or even speculation except perhaps as entertainment.

Consider the Canadians of 1867. There were just 3.5 million of them, a tenth what we are now. Their life expectancy at birth was 41.6 years, which means Canadians born on Confederation Day couldn't

reasonably expect to see their country's 50th anniversary in 1917. Their incomes, though respectable internationally, were what we once would have called "third world," barely $1,500 in the purchasing power of the U.S. dollar of 1990. (In 2010 in that currency, the average Canadian income was $24,941, fully 17 times higher.) Canadians' average formal education in 1867 was 5.7 years. The previous year, 1866, 257 of them had graduated from university (compared to more than two million enrolled in university in 2015/16). Only 107,225 Canadians — Montrealers — lived in a city of more than 100,000 people. Almost 90% lived on farms or in towns of less than 5,000. The majority were farmers or agricultural workers living by the rhythms and dictates of temperature and rainfall. They feared invasion by Fenians based in the U.S. or indeed by the U.S. itself, which had just survived a bloody civil war in which the British Empire would have preferred a rebel victory or at least a stalemate. For the fathers — all fathers — of the new Confederation, getting from Quebec City to Charlottetown three years earlier had taken three and a half days by steamer. Travel to the Pacific coast colony of British Columbia, a potential entrant to the new Confederation, took weeks or months. On July 1, 1867, the first successful transatlantic cable, joining Ireland and Heart's Content, Newfoundland, was not yet 11 months old.

Could those Canadians of 1867 have imagined that just 50 years later they would be nine provinces and eight million strong? Their per capita incomes would be 2.6 times what they had been 50 years earlier? And fully 500,000 of them would be in Europe fighting alongside the Americans in a war even more terrible than the U.S. Civil War? Could they have foreseen that some soldiers in this war would bombard the enemy *from above* from within flying machines they could guide to their targets? That military commanders many miles apart would talk with one another through copper cables, while other soldiers would fight on land in horseless vehicles powered by a "refined" version of black sludge pumped out of the ground? To observe the 100th anniversary of Canada's income tax — which might also have seemed unimaginable in 1867 — I read the parliamentary debates on the bill to introduce an "income war tax" (as it was known until 1949). Canada was still very British in 1917. MPs made frequent reference to U.K. events, personalities, laws, institutions and even poetry in full confidence that the other men listening — only men in 1917 — would understand the context and references. Another recurring debate had to do with the problem of how to pay for the country's second transcontinental railway, which was heavily indebted but, like the CPR that had preceded it, could move Canadians across their country in just days.

In their turn, could those Canadians of 1917 have imagined that in 1967 their children and grandchildren would already be 22 years on from another world war of even greater horror and extent than the one they were living through? Or that it would have been ended by super-bombs embodying the power of many days' bombardment in the worst battles of their own Great War? The Canada of 1967 was a country of 20 million, two and a half times what it had been in 1917. Per capita GDP was now $12,050, 3.1 times its level 50 years earlier. Flying machines could get Canadians, who now lived mainly in cities, each with at least one "airport," almost anywhere in their country in just hours. Six days before Centennial Day, by a miracle of the "space age," up to 700 million people watched "Our World," a live, two and a half hour international "television"

collaboration featuring Marshall McLuhan, Maria Callas, Pablo Picasso and, most famously, a British musical quartet with the strange name of "Beatles," who introduced their song *All You Need Is Love*. Many viewers knew that within as little as 24 months' time they might see an American astronaut walk on the moon and return to Earth.

As for those Canadians of 1967, could they have imagined the world we now live in, just 50 years later? Speaking as one of them, I can say, emphatically, "No!" In 1967 I wrote my high-school term papers on my father's Smith-Corona portable typewriter, a mechanical stamping machine that made use of a carbon-impregnated ribbon to impress black or red letters onto paper. By contrast, I am writing this "paper" (we still call them papers) on a "laptop computer," which is one of five computers I own, not counting the one I carry in my pocket, with which I track weather and news in real time, trace my tracks up and down ski hills, and talk or exchange "text messages" with people anywhere on the globe. (In 1967, if you saw someone walking along the street talking to himself you looked the other way: Now it happens all the time: He's not crazy, he's just on his phone.) Until the 1940s a "computer" was a person who did mathematical calculations for a living. The economist Milton Friedman served as one for the U.S. government during World War II. Though by 1967 most people had heard of electronic computers, only governments, businesses and institutions owned them. My own experience of them began two years later in university. I interacted with the machines by using a kind of typewriter to punch holes in cards, each of which represented a "line" of "code," and then taking my cards over to the computer centre, where the room-sized machines were stored, and giving them to the attendant, who would return them to me the next day, along with a print-out of whatever the computer had calculated at my request — once I finally got the request into a form it could understand. Like most people then, I believed computers would improve — they had improved markedly in the previous 20 years — but I had no idea how much.

Could the Canadians of 1867 have imagined the Somme, the federal income tax and a four-day trip to British Columbia? Could those of 1917 have imagined television, jet travel and rockets to the moon? Could the Canadians of 1967 have imagined the ubiquity of powerful computers and communication? Yes, in principle, they could have. Did they? No, no and no. Maybe a solitary eccentric here or there predicted something that wasn't totally dissimilar to what eventually came to be. But there was no way of distinguishing inspired forecast from lunatic fantasy and it would have been folly to base any important public policies — or anything at all, really — on such confabulation. So I don't see much point worrying about what Canada, if it survives, will be like in 2068.

On the other hand, I do suspect — I think I know — that my children and theirs will still be concerned with three problems that have preoccupied the country since its beginnings. The first is relations with the United States, which had much to do with Canada's founding, were still important in 1917, just six years after the 1911 reciprocity election, remained crucial in 1967, two years after the Auto Pact, and are still paramount today, as a mercantilist president tries to reverse the trade strategy the U.S. has pursued since the mid-1930s.

Relations between French and English in Canada

have also been part of our history since Confederation and before. If the proportion of French speakers in Canada continues to decline, it may become less central, but so long as francophones are concentrated in one province, the threat of its secession and therefore the need to manage these relations will continue.

Finally, how to earn a living has preoccupied our species, let alone our nation, since each began. In 1930, with typical cheekiness, John Maynard Keynes predicted in "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren" that, despite that era's debilitating depression, these grandchildren would be so rich that material needs would no longer concern them. That does not seem to have happened, even in a country where real incomes, as best they can be compared across eras, are approaching 20 times what they were in 1867. Not just because I'm an economist, I'm reasonably sure material matters will still concern our own grandchildren.

Apart from these three enduring problems, it's all unknown unknowns as far as the eye can't see.