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A commissioner for future generations could boost the well-being of tomorrow's Canadians

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Canadians are being confronted with short-term thinking, pressures, and incentives all the time. At work, at school, in our consumer, social and digital lives, the stress of quick performance and instant gratification takes the lead. Wearing by politicians' improvisational or debt-financed vote-buying practices, Canadians can not count on them to govern for the long-term either. When our own Canadian NIMBY-ism means "not to my generation's expenses," who is there to protect our voiceless descendants against costly status quo or chronic public liabilities in the 2030s?

Maybe your MP is stressed about returning wildfires in the North or incendiary Trumpism in the South. But who is making long-term plans and provisions for the potential impacts of years of smoky air or Washington politics, superintelligent AI replacing millions of white-collar taxpayers, rogue biosynthetic organisms contaminating our fields or water (incl. our new "Arctic Seaway") or a cyber-attack triggering a Third World War or, at minimum, full national chaos à-la *Leave the World Behind* (a Netflix movie)? As a result, young Canadians are [depressed](#) and carries [pessimistic](#) expectations for the decades ahead of them. Envy boomers' lives, Gen-Z and Gen-Alpha feel abandoned by their parents and grandparents' choices and behaviours, their legacy of unfixed problems, and a load of emerging, existential new ones. Fearing fundamental hurdles, more young couples are considering parenthood an unrealistic option.

Eschewing what I call "fast fashion politics", or stylish, continuous and quickly disposable political statements or actions that are inexpensive in the short-term but can both propel or patch the crises du jour, some jurisdictions have made long-termism and intergenerational fairness a cornerstone of public administration. In 1993, Finland established the Committee for the Future, a dedicated parliamentary organ for futures studies and long-range visioning and planning, which also assesses technological development and their societal consequences. The United Arab Emirates has a Minister of the Future. Hungary has an Ombudsman for Future Generations. In Wales, a Future Generations Commissioner must audit government decisions from the viewpoint of future and unborn Welsh people, recommend actions to safeguard their well-being, and counterbalance excesses of short-term thinking. Germany and Singapore have somewhat similar apparatus. The objective is to impose futuristic and intergenerational thinking horizontally across policy- and budget-making, new laws, reforms, and public investments and to ask the question: will the consequences of our actions today enhance or impair the well-being of tomorrow's generations?

By creating a Canadian Commissioner for Future Generations, we could boost the chances that our descendants will inherit a satisfying standard of living with the options to shape and enjoy their own epoch. Such a commissioner will aspire to increase our consideration and

accountability to approximately 35 million Canadians who will join us between now and our bicentenary in 2067.

The purpose of the commissioner would be to safeguard the well-being of future generations through three responsibilities. First, monitor, assess, and audit government action or inaction, report potential long-term side-effects on future generations and continually challenge short-term thinking. Second, research and highlight the megatrends, challenges, and opportunities facing future generations, and act as a foresight and innovation bridge between government, and business, academia and civil society (particularly young people). Last, guide and promote an integrated federal-provincial approach to long-term policy planning that is supportive of constant, coherent and coordinated provincial and local actions aimed at preserving and enhancing the well-being of tomorrow's Canadians.

The Commissioner for Future Generations office could be integrated into the Office of the Auditor General of Canada at little extra expense, similar to the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. The commissioner could benefit from existing all-of-government examination access, and could optimize existing auditing expertise and products, without necessarily duplicating them. Federal budgets aficionados know that Finance Canada has an *Intergenerational Impacts Assessment* in its documents. But it simply identifies the age cohort receiving or disproportionately enjoying a federal benefit. Knowing if a "youth," "adult," or "senior" gets the candy is not about evaluating the side-effects of sugar-high policies on people who, in fact, are not at the table yet. But a future generation impact assessment would show a long-range score and outlook. The future generations commissioner could centralize the tracking of specific future-oriented metrics, targets or even costs instituted by successive governments – on fiscal, social mobility, reconciliation, clean energy, health, or cultural objectives, for example. That would simplify citizens' understanding of government's multi-year progress.

On the research side, we could ask the commissioner to publish a report every four years on what the lives of future Canadians may look like in 20 years, and what has been done and not done to maximize their opportunities and minimize their risks. The report should avoid wishful, aspirational thinking, and instead capture the tone of the U.S. National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends* reports, but with domestically focused analysis of the most probable scenarios and long-term repercussions of our present-day governance. To do so, the commissioner could convene external experts, and align internal resources, such as Policy Horizons Canada (a government unit where I have been a visiting futurist; it does not have the legal power to challenge the political agenda) and several departmental hubs of future-minded civil servants -- yes, they do exist and do care. From time to time, the commissioner could fill policy void by proposing new practice, funding, incentive, or legal concepts to relevant House of Commons or Senate committees; and by organising public challenges where prizes are awarded to teams of innovators who solve specific long-term problems of relevance to tomorrow's public finance, safety and overall good.

Deepening and formalising inter-agency and inter-provincial strategic foresight practices and future-fit policy thinking could help solve two problems. Our federal-provincial leaders are not meeting often enough. In fact, they rarely meet to discuss the future, but to argue about past and present matters. The commissioner should provide the Prime Minister and the Premiers with a neutral and “sanitized white space” where they can only think and talk about the well-being of future generations, not today’s voters, and take decisions with upside in 20 or 50 years. This could come with an extra benefit: a shared-vision of the future is step-one in team building. Also, when thinking about how hard it is for the provinces to recognize unavoidable trends and future challenges and to invest in long-term public infrastructure, healthcare, housing, education and climate change solutions, long-range policy planning is neglected at the provincial level too. Maybe some provinces will want to enshrine the intergenerational fairness spirit in a similar commissioner function. That would further mobilize the limitless ingenuity our cities, villages and communities can deploy towards a positive future, and localize our understanding of whether we are harming or helping tomorrow’s Ontarians, Manitobans, Quebeckers, etc.

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“Should moral and legal rights be granted to members of future generations?” is an old but incorrect question. It is a moral obligation for today’s generation to care about the next one, and for that next one to do the same again. But sometimes, acting like good ancestors, a primordial onus, requires someone else’s oversight. The motto of people who are shaping their destiny with a proud legacy in mind is: it’s not because we can’t predict the future that we should not prepare and build it. We inherit a natural, physical, financial, and cultural patrimony from past generations, both as beneficiaries and as custodians under the duty to bequeath this heritage to future generations in no worse condition than it was received. In a busy, long-term attention deficit republic of ever-refined individual rights and personal comfort, where personal and collective obligations are either forgotten or outsourced to big government, the time has come for at least one ombudsman to give a voice to those millions of Canadians who will come after us.

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ABOUT ERIC NOËL

Eric Noël is a long-term thinking advocate, macro-change strategist, and financier. His focus is on tomorrow’s markets and society, including business and economic challenges coming from demographic, technological, climate and socio-political changes. He has advised several *Fortune 100™* companies and Canada’s largest organisations on transactions exceeding \$US 30B in some 30 countries. He also served government agencies, the United Nations, and global philanthropies. Following a 25-year career at Oxford Analytica, a leading global markets, politico-economic research and advisory think tank, Eric splits his time between two set of activities. As an outside advisor and visiting futurist, he continues sharing his analysis and forecasting expertise with institutional investors, CEOs and policymakers in the attempt to both stimulate more long-term thinking, planning, incentives and actions, and advocate for the well-being of future generations. As an investor and entrepreneur, he is advancing bold technology projects aimed at saving lives, energy and the planet. Eric initiated the *Canada Towards 2030* foresight project in 2013, serves as Chair of the *Millennium Project Canada* and is an advisor to the Dubai Future Foundation. www.canada2030.ca / www.ericnoel.org / www.oxan.com www.linkedin.com/in/eric-noel-852903 / www.lesaffaires.com/blogues/eric-noel / www.oxan.com