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The Lessons of Walkerton Run Deep*

The lessons of Walkerton come at an immeasurable price. They show what can happen when we downplay or neglect the importance of public infrastructure that protects our health and safety.

Clean water pipes are not the stuff of dinnertime conversation. Safe drinking water does not translate into snappy political slogans. Sewage treatment is not a vote-getter in political rallies. Until now.

Walkerton is a tragic but instructive wake-up call. It speaks to the need for high-quality public infrastructure – the amenities that benefit us all but are either invisible or simply taken for granted.

But Walkerton is about far more than the quality of water. It is about how we make public investments to promote and protect the quality of life.

Walkerton is a lesson in the importance of the public good. The ‘public good’ refers to actions taken in the interest of all citizens.

It is in the public interest to protect the public good. The air and water that comprise the natural commons are essential components of life. Perhaps we need to understand that there is also a social commons that comprises the lifeblood of our collective well-being. Health care, education, income security and early childhood development are primary examples.

Unfortunately, the public good is a concept that has fallen out of favour in recent years. It flies in the face of unfettered individualism that has become the hallmark of the ‘new economy.’ Why be concerned about the common good when it is apparently more profitable to look out for personal interest?

Market ideology – which is anything but new – clearly has gained ground in recent years with business and government elites. Yet part of the defence for the public good arises from the very demands of the so-called new economy.

Concerns have been expressed, for example, about the ‘brain drain’ – which generally has been defined to mean the loss of skilled Canadian

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workers to the US. Policy proposals to stem the brain drain typically have focussed upon aligning our wages and taxes with the US.

But policy responses which Americanize our labour market and taxation systems inadvertently could have the opposite effect. The danger is not only that we might fall short in our attempts to make the Canadian labour market and tax levels competitive with the US. We also might sacrifice the distinctive cultural and social features of our country that actually confer a competitive edge on the world stage.

Lessons from the ‘old economy’ are also instructive. A national system of social security evolved in Canada in the years following the Second World War. The various programs that comprised the social security system were an antidote to the economic devastation and social despair arising from the Depression and war-time chaos. They were the bulwark against an unstable economy. They helped compensate for an insecure income. They protected against an uncertain future.

Ironically, despite the ‘new’ economic context, the original core rationale for social security remains as valid and necessary today as in the past. The need for protection against common threats through public provision is all the more critical in a rapidly changing labour market with unstable earnings and few associated benefits. It is all the more important in an increasingly knowledge-based economy in which social and intellectual capital are vital to nations’ comparative advantage.

Our publicly financed health care system also makes a key contribution to the public good. Investment in a healthy population is the basis for a vibrant economy with healthy, productive workers. Public support for health care helps ensure a healthy society generally free of widespread disease.

A system of high-quality public education advances the well-being of all citizens. Education and skills development are essential to the financial security of individuals and of nations. Most jobs in future will require a postsecondary education.

But the impact of public education moves well beyond training-for-a-good-job. Public education is the basis for an informed intelligent citizenry that comprises the bedrock of democracy. Yet despite the importance of public education to the economic, moral and democratic health of individuals and of nations, it has been subject to assault through continued cuts and increased user fees.

Public investments that comprise the public good are not generally seen as assets. Government expenditure in such areas as clean water, health care and public education is basically counted, for bookkeeping purposes, as an outflow.

We have seen all too tragically what can happen when public spending in a crucial area – such as environmental protection – is viewed simply as a minus sign on a ledger sheet. Public investments in the core components of environmental and social infrastructure should be considered as essential contributions towards the foundation of a healthy, successful and sustainable society.

The Walkerton tragedy is a very hard way to learn a relatively simple lesson: There is real good in the public good.

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