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editor’s introduction

“What’s the most urgent, exciting idea you can think of to improve the country?”

We asked each contributor to this special Literary Review of Canada supplement the same question, canvassing notable writers, leaders and thinkers for ways to make Canadian life better. While answers ranged from infrastructure to romance, some trends emerged: concern with cities, environmental sustainability and culture with a conscience—and the sort of defiantly impractical idealism required to actually change things.

You’ll also find recommendations inside for vital contemporary reading, from other LRC contributors: the quotes accompanying each pick are taken from their full rationales, available at reviewcanada.ca/vital-reading.

All this taps into the same passionate engagement with books, art and public affairs that drives both the LRC magazine and our national Spur festival (spurfestival.ca). So we hope you’ll likewise find ideas here worth mulling over, talking through and putting into action!

— Alastair Cheng
I am now completing a novel about a Japanese immigrant, Frankie Hanesaka—who cannily exploitative wheeler-dealer in search of redemption.

I like to illustrate exceptionally irrational realities by a simple thought experiment. Here is just one of many ways for him to render an instant judge of fundamentals and to understand all specific facts to a super-sapient extra-terrestrial whose ability to know all terrestrial whose ability to know all carbon dioxide and other pollutants; and that they are packed by people who must spend at least three (from Billy Bishop) or four hours (from Pearson) getting from downtown Toronto to downtown Montreal, coping with the CATSA and late-arriving aircraft.

But, instead, I would also tell him Air Canada's RapidAir has 32 flights every weekday between Toronto and Ottawa and 78 flights between Toronto and Montreal, departing every hour or, during peak travel periods, every 30 minutes; that, in addition, Porter Airlines flying from Billy Bishop Airport has about 60 flights on these routes; that these flights burn kerosene distilled from non-renewable crude oil, emitting far more inexpensive and clean hydro-electricity than does Canada. He would know that the cheapest, the safest, the least energy intensive and the most comfortable way of moving large numbers of people between major cities is a high-speed train powered by electricity; I would tell him that Montreal's Bombardier makes such trains for overseas markets and that its latest design (Zefiro, running at 250–380 kilometres/hour) is a leading choice for China's expanding network of rapid trains. He would know that with common speeds of at least 250–300 kilometres/hour, rapid train travel is a superior choice to flying on all distances of less than 1,000 kilometres because (even after leaving unpredictable security control and technical delays aside) it takes less time than the combination of arriving at an airport at least one hour before departure, the flight itself, waiting for baggage, and then taking an interminable taxi or bus ride downtown. I would tell him that the greatest line-up of Canadian population is the corridor joining Toronto (metro is greater than six million—area is greater than 1.2 million) and Montreal (metro is close to four million). With its nearby hinterland, it is home to about 13 million people, with about 500 kilometres between the outer city pair—almost exactly a two-hour ride (1.50–2.20 depending on the average speed) by a rapid train.

Of course, small minds devoid of any vision would object that the link would be too expensive. Nonsense: this country has wasted much more on many dubious, and ephemeral, projects. Building long-lasting infrastructure that will serve, efficiently and safely, hundreds of millions of people for decades to come is to create enviable technical patrimony. It is the very essence of nation building: did we not complete a rail project that was incomparably more costly for its time, and more difficult, in the 1980s Japan and France built their rapid trains when their per capita gross domestic product was significantly lower than ours, and China is now doing it while its per capita income is a fraction of ours. Small minds would say that the population is not large enough to justify the link. Nonsense: trains à grande vitesse run from Paris (metro is 12 million) to Rennes (650,000) or between Bordeaux (1.1 million) and Montpellier (550,000). And small minds would also say that the link would be too difficult and too risky in our climate. Utter nonsense: on October 1, 2014, the Japanese shinkansen celebrated 50 years of operation, in a country of earthquakes, landslides, typhoons and snowfalls reaching house roofs (yes, since 1897 a branch of that rapid train goes to Nagano)—all without a single fatality and with an average delay of 36 seconds! By not acting as boldly as other (often less affluent) nations, indeed as its former, more determined, self, Canada has chosen a second-class status, and appears to be content with it.

Vaclav Smil’s Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Environment at the University of Manitoba, and the author of 37 books on many aspects of energy, environment, population, food and the history of technical advances.

Frankie’s early ambition to own Toronto’s waterfront lands they left behind, while embracing future promise. Why We Disagree about Climate Change, by Mike Hulme ‘Argues that climate change is not a problem to be solved, but an opportunity.’ JOHN ROBINSON