

# Turn out the Lights

A compelling, anti-tax narrative is fuelling a grand dismantling of our living standards. Is there a progressive narrative to counter it?

Final Draft

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# 1. Introduction

*“I was born on October the 28<sup>th</sup>, 1922 and I was born at home. My first memories of being, just being, was when there were men in the house putting the electricity in and digging little holes in the wall putting the wires through. How excited we all were because up till then we used lamps. I think that’s about my first recollection of my life.”*

*-- Grace Elizabeth Young Stapleton, age 89  
Born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, October 28th, 1922*

*“The surprise was what happened next -- the city government did what they said they would. Garbage cans were removed from parks and water was emptied from the swimming pools. A third of all streetlights in the city were turned off. It was a matter of simple economics: these things cost money, and if the citizens of Colorado Springs weren’t willing to pay for them, that was how it would be. It was the shutting off of streetlights, perhaps, that garnered the most attention, the idea of a darkened city at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. “Public Safety: Lights out in Colorado Springs” ran the headline in the New York Times. The Wall Street Journal called it a conservative paradise.”*

*-- Stephen Hayward, “Dispatch from Colorado Springs -- A Canadian resident learns what happens when the town council calls the bluff of the lower-taxes movement,”  
Literary Review of Canada, January 2011*

Stephen Hayward recently analyzed an American city’s close brush with the cancellation of basic utilities – the things that define our collective standard of living. This was in response to a powerful local tax cut movement, and a popular narrative that championed the notion of public scarcity. This narrative takes as an article of faith that the return of resources to individuals is so superior a notion, that even the loss of public utilities such as streetlamps could be seen as a public good.

How surprising this state of affairs is to my mother, whose first recollection of the 1920s was the mass movement to electrical power. This transformation of everyday life took place at a time when there was a great narrative of social progress. Only one, long-lived generation ago, we first turned on the lights. How did the idea of turning them out become conceivable?

When communities turn out their lights and fail to fix their roads based on a blanket belief that taxes are bad, we begin to become capable of dismantling our hard-fought living standards based on distrust in the very institutions that allowed us to prosper. We have a new narrative that calls for ever more public goods to be made private, for less government, and for lower taxes.

Continued tax cutting prevents government from acting and regulating in the way that a civil society expects. And yet there is an abiding belief that we can keep cutting taxes and maintain our services – perhaps by eliminating government inefficiencies, by finding the elusive ‘gravy’ that has recently become so infamous in the city of Toronto.

The anti-tax vision tells us that we will all be better off if government obtains fewer resources and the government provides fewer services. In this view, if we do more for ourselves, then leaner governments will be better able to pay off deficits and debts.<sup>1</sup> The progressive vision tells us to increase resources to governments to protect public services and invest in the infrastructure needed to support the larger economy. This in turn results in the only clear route for the government to manage deficits and debts effectively.<sup>2</sup>

This paper looks at why the tax-cut narrative, despite its internal contradictions, remains so compelling and so popular. We seek to provide an antidote to the loss of a strong progressive narrative and we suggest some things that progressive-minded people can do to change this.

In the past, societal narratives about our economy and progress have sustained progressive reforms in public institutions, even when the moves were thought to be very costly. As examples, in this paper we describe how postage stamps and the minimum wage were seen as important investments in our infrastructure that would lead to growth and the improvement of our living standards. We also look at an example of how the progressive narrative is expressed in the emerging economy of Botswana.

We begin with John Kenneth Galbraith’s thoughts on the nature of ideas that evolve into ‘conventional wisdom’. This helps us understand why progressive narratives about the market have lost prominence in our times, while the ideas about leaner government and fewer taxes have become dominant.

Too often, progressives break all of Galbraith’s rules about the nature of conventional wisdom. This paper seeks to provide an antidote to the loss of a strong progressive narrative and suggests what progressives can do to change this.

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1. This narrative views low taxes as facilitating economic growth, which is believed to reduce debt more effectively than tax revenue would. For more information on how this narrative looks in policy form, see BBC (2010, May 18). “Cameron and Clegg set out Big Society Policy ideas” UK: BBC. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/8688860.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/8688860.stm)

2. For an example of this narrative, see: Half in Ten: the Campaign to Cut Poverty in Half in Ten Years [http://halfinten.org/issues/econ\\_security/](http://halfinten.org/issues/econ_security/)

## 2. The elements of a compelling narrative

*“Numerous factors contribute to the acceptability of ideas. To a very large extent, of course, we associate truth with convenience – with what most closely accords with self-interest and personal well-being or promises best to avoid awkward effort of unwelcome dislocation of life. We also find highly acceptable what contributes most to self-esteem.”<sup>3</sup>*

*-- John Kenneth Galbraith*

In *The Affluent Society*, first published in 1958, John Kenneth Galbraith described how knowledge becomes ‘conventional wisdom’ in our society. In Galbraith’s view, it is the ideas that make us feel good that become the most acceptable. We come to accept as true the ideas that make us feel comfortable and boost our self-esteem. Galbraith also notes that these ideas are simple and relatively easy to grasp.

In a nutshell, Galbraith seems to be saying, a compelling narrative is comfortable and comforting, easy to grasp, and self-esteem enhancing.

Galbraith’s conventional wisdom elucidates why some political and economic narratives end up resonating with people while others fall flat. For example, Wangari Maathai’s Greenbelt Movement combated environmental degradation in Kenya by developing a compelling, progressive narrative. Each Kenyan woman who planted trees was rebuilding the environment and contributing to the well-being of her nation. The message was simple and easy to grasp. It made people feel comfortable. It allowed women to feel *good* about playing their part in environmental protection. This narrative became the conventional wisdom in Kenya and Wangari Maathai was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for her work.

Galbraith’s framework of conventional wisdom can help us understand why progressive narratives about the market have not gained prominence, while ideas about leaner government and fewer taxes have become dominant. In the next section of this paper, we show how the anti-tax narrative fits snugly into the framework of Galbraith’s elements. Then we look at two examples of how, in the past, progressive narratives in both the private and the public sector conformed to the Galbraith framework. We then look at how the current progressive narrative tends to break all of Galbraith’s tenets for achieving the acceptability of conventional wisdom.

Finally, we look at a contemporary example of a compelling progressive narrative in Canada – the rhetoric of the late Honourable Jack Layton.

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3. Galbraith, J. K. (1998) *The Affluent Society*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; p. 7

### 3. The anti-tax narrative: Private abundance and public scarcity

*“The debate in Congress over taxes ultimately comes down to this: Who knows best how to use your money: the politicians in Washington or you? I believe the money we spend in Washington is your money, not the government's money. I trust you to make the best decisions about what to do with your hard-earned dollars, because when you do, your family is better off, our economy grows, and prosperity and opportunity spread throughout our great land.”*

*-- President George W. Bush, Radio Address, April 1, 2006*

*“You know, there are two schools in economics on this. One is that there are some good taxes and the other is that no taxes are good taxes. I'm in the latter category. I don't believe that any taxes are good taxes.*

*--Prime Minister Stephen Harper, G8 address in Italy, July 2009*

Both George W. Bush and Stephen Harper were unequivocal in their opposition to taxation both before taking power and after. Their views were neither hedged nor hidden as they rose to become multi-term leaders of two of North America's democracies. The importance of this fact should not be underestimated.

The dominant school of thought over the last 30 years has been that government has been mortgaging our future and our children's future for the temporary convenience of the present.<sup>4</sup> This American school of thought (first articulated as Reaganomics) has been largely appropriated in Canada.

We live in an era that is attracted to less government and lower taxes. The apparent cure for bad government is less government. The prevailing view is that individual taxpayers can spend their money better than the government can. With less government and lower taxes, so the narrative goes, our individual living standards will rise, and collectively, the world will be a better place.

There is also a premise that things will get worse unless we introduce restraint on spending, even if that spending is comprised of investments in the future. Once lofty goals of better health, social development, equity, and inclusion start to ring hollow, as if progress and growth can only be founded on endless and damaging debt.

Let us look again at John Kenneth Galbraith's three elements of conventional wisdom:

1. **Comfortable:** People feel comfortable with or comforted by the views expressed and the values they uphold.

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4. Reagan, R. (1981). “First Inaugural Address, Speech by Ronald Reagan”. Washington DC.

2. **Understandable:** The views expressed are relatively easy to grasp. The frame or viewpoint is shared easily.
3. **Self-esteem enhancing:** People feel good about themselves when they express the conventional view.

Now, let's measure the vision of private abundance and public scarcity against these elements to see how this narrative has become the conventional wisdom.

## **Comfortable**

Generally speaking, people don't enjoy paying taxes. Smart people avoid them. People see that money is taken from them involuntarily and it goes to support things they don't necessarily like. They understand why they pay taxes but they don't know whether they are taxed fairly. They worry that there may be little accountability that their taxes are not spent responsibly. They are confused and vague about how their tax money is spent.

People are comfortable spending less in taxes. They look forward to rebates and refunds. They don't necessarily see the connection between lower services and lower taxes, because they view the public sphere as riddled with waste. People are more comfortable with public scarcity than with public abundance.

## **Understandable**

Less government, lower taxes, more of my money staying with me, ending gravy trains, and respect for taxpayers are all simple concepts. In contrast, the connection between taxation and government programs is highly complex. Paying taxes at various levels of government, hidden taxation, and range of fees for government services are all difficult concepts.

Both individual abundance and public scarcity are understandable frames of reference. Both are paradigms for a better standard of living. Ronald Reagan, in 1980, asked the question: "Are you better off than four years ago?" The implication was (in part) that higher taxes and more government spending made families worse off.

Sidewalks, old age homes, and income security systems don't appear out of the blue, and once neglected, they are expensive to rehabilitate. But too many people believe that civic amenities will somehow remain in the landscape, regardless of tax cuts. The town of Colorado Springs and the City of Toronto are two recent examples illustrating the dismay felt by citizens who suddenly had to learn that taxes are connected to city services. Further, many people do not care about public institutions such as social assistance and old age homes until they need them.

## **Self-esteem enhancing**

Paying more tax does not raise self-esteem. Paying less tax is seen as smart. People celebrate tax breaks. In contrast, self-esteem is lowered when tax breaks are seen as unequal or go to those seen as undeserving. In addition, when tax breaks are targeted to achieve a purpose, they lower self-esteem if they are seen as not achieving it. People feel deceived and demeaned by perceived public waste.

Public scarcity, as illustrated by phrases like: “We are in debt,” “There’s no money,” and “scarce taxpayer dollars” promote the feeling that there should be a tighter rein placed on spending. Belt-tightening governments – governments that act like responsible families do in times of fiscal restraint or debt – enhance self-esteem.

## **4. The progressive narrative as it was: investments that led to growth**

### **Investment in the public sector**

On November 24, 1852, the *New York Times* published an article titled “Cheap Postage in Canada”. Canada had reduced its postage rates drastically and had begun to produce its own postage stamps after the Canada Post Office had been “given up by the Imperial authorities.”<sup>5</sup>

The prevailing expectation was that revenues would drop precipitously. But something strange and unanticipated began to happen:

“With all these reductions, it has been found that [the] 15,000 pounds appropriated [in the] last session of the legislature to meet the apprehended deficiency in the revenue, has more than covered it. The first quarter of the present fiscal year ... exhibits still more favourable results of the cheap system. The increase of business is very marked.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the longest lasting public policy changes in Canada got off to a good beginning. The change was to allow any person in Canada to post a letter of a half-ounce or less to anyone else in Canada for a standard fee – 3 pence in 1851. The new policy replaced an almost incomprehensible system of charges that took great expertise to administer and which few understood.

Some 160 years later, the postage policy is still in place. Anyone living in Whitehorse can send a standard letter to a friend in St. John’s for a low standard fee (59 cents + sales tax in 2011). The same rate applies to someone mailing a letter to a friend across the street.

From many points of view, this long lasting public policy contains grave inequities. It costs much more to deliver a letter across the country than it does to mail one across the street. The subsidy to people in far-flung places is obviously higher than to those living closer to large post office hubs. Clearly, there is a case to abandon this 160 year old policy and align charges closer to real costs.

But the standard fee postal rate is a policy that helped build Canada. The *Times* article from 1852 tells us how:

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5. “Cheap postage in Canada”, the *New York Times*, November 24, 1852

6. *Ibid*

“During the past fiscal year, 243 new Post Offices have been established. Post communication between Canada and the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, by land route via Quebec and Temiscuator has with the cooperation of the latter provinces, been increased from twice to three times a week.”

The article noted that mail usage increased by more than 110% from 1851 to 1852. But the new cheaper postal rate was not implemented only in the name of simplicity:

“The Postmaster General gives it as his opinion that packet postage ought to be reduced; the pressing high rates pressing severely upon poor emigrants and others, at a time like this, when thousands of families are as it were, divided between the two continents .... in conclusion, the Postmaster General recommends a further reduction of postage and expresses his opinion that the financial condition and prospects of the Department at the close of another year, will be such as to warrant the Governor-General in recommending a penny rate.”<sup>7</sup>

What is going on here? Canada implemented a simpler system that helped make the nation more productive, built our early communications network, and kept Canadians in touch with one another. It was less expensive, addressed poverty, and was more popular with the public. Was it a fluke?

The answer is no. Our system of roads, railways, airports, telecommunications, and our electrical grid had similar outcomes when they were first put in place. Things got less expensive and our living standards rose. Each of these segments of our modern infrastructure continues to distinguish modern Canada and other rich countries from developing countries that have poor utilities or lack modern infrastructure.

To the extent possible, we created equal systems that provided basic services at similar rates for all, so that all would benefit. Government and business worked together.

### **Private sector investment in labour**

On January 5, 1914, Henry Ford called reporters to the Ford Plant in Dearborn Michigan to hear an important announcement.. “The Ford Motor Company, the greatest and most successful automobile manufacturing company in the world, will, on January 12, inaugurate the greatest revolution in the matter of rewards for its workers ever known in the industrial world,” he began.

He explained the details: not only would the plant switch from two nine-hour shifts to three eight-hour ones, allowing it to run around the clock, but each man over 22 would receive the minimum wage of \$5 a day, and men under 22 would qualify if they had dependants. “The commonest labourer who sweeps the floor shall receive his \$5 per day,” Ford told the reporters. “We believe in making 20,000 men prosperous and contented rather than follow the plan of

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7, Ibid

making a few slave drivers in our establishment millionaires.”<sup>8</sup> Henry Ford had, in effect, invented the social policy of the minimum wage.

Henry Ford was not, by any standard we would use today, a progressive man. He would go on to become an outspoken union buster. He was also solidly against the rights of women and an overt racist. His recruiting practices through a ‘Sociological Department’ were both patronizing and demeaning.

Yet his ground-breaking wage increase, which more than doubled the average payment of \$2.34 a day, revealed a real interest in both equality and enterprise. Ford talked of topics such as social justice and fairness. He believed that “dying rich was a disgrace.” Ford also understood that paying his employees a living wage would make them more productive:

“Recognizing the human element in mass production, Ford knew that retaining more employees would lower costs, and that a happier work force would inevitably lead to greater productivity. The numbers bore him out. Between 1914 and 1916, the company's profits doubled from \$30 million to \$60 million. "The payment of five dollars a day for an eight-hour day was one of the finest cost-cutting moves we ever made," he later said.”<sup>9</sup>

## **5. The dilemma of the progressive narrative in our times**

The narrative that drove rich nations to develop the modern world assumed that governments and industry, as well as the non-profit sector, worked together to create growth and prosperity for all. The narrative of growth and prosperity took the truth of ever-increasing living standards to be a self-evident good. That all should benefit was axiomatic.

The progressive narrative held that market forces would always create inequality. Markets would fail from time to time. The role of the state was to foster basic equality and mitigate market failure. This view held sway well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This is the same vision that progressives would like to put forward today: that government can foster basic equality and allay market failure; that the public pooling of resources in government helps to improve living standards. The narrative of continuous growth and improved living standards meets all of the elements of Galbraith’s conventional wisdom: it gives us comfort, it is easy to grasp, and it makes us feel good about ourselves.

However, for the first time in Canada's history, the progressive narrative must come to terms with the limits of our environment, our government, and our future.

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8. <http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/web/20060105-henry-ford-five-dollar-day-model-t-ford-motor-company-assembly-line-james-couzens-highland-park-detroit-automobiles.shtml>

9. Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc. and Forbes Inc., Forbes greatest Business Stories of All Time, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996 <http://www.wiley.com/legacy/products/subject/business/forbes/ford.html>

We cannot continue to relentlessly exploit our planet. We have become too dependent on fossil fuels that produce too much carbon dioxide and foment political instability.

We cannot indefinitely spend money we don't have. In government, we see spending and debt at levels that are unsustainable. Good government ultimately must try to match its spending with its taxation.

We must somehow place limits on growth and consumption. We see our children as the first generation that will have life spans shorter than our own due to unhealthy living and the obesity it causes.

But when we adopt the paradigm of sustainability, we are tapped on the shoulder by economists who will helpfully remind us that limiting consumption and spending will result in lower growth, an ever shrinking economy that will itself become unsustainable. We need to grow and we need to prosper, and that is difficult or impossible in a state of perpetual restraint. It is ultimately not possible to shrink yourself bigger.

Families, it is said, have to tighten their belts in tough times. They must stop borrowing and pay their debts. The conventional wisdom is that government should do the same. But Canada and the United States, like almost all rich countries, must borrow money. The ability to raise capital was one of the reasons they became countries in the first place. Once a land becomes a legal entity, it creates a currency and it is able to invest in its future. Growth begins with new investment. What is simple prudence for a family might be fiscally unsound for a government.

None of these ideas are comfortable. They are complicated and hard to grasp. Many of them make us feel bad about the way we have been living and depressed about the future.

### **The progressive dilemma in times of economic crisis**

When economic crisis strikes, we rush to stimulate, produce, and consume in a way that seems antithetical to restraint and sustainability. We seem to lose sight of the evidentiary and moral compass that took us down the road of discipline and belt tightening.

Throughout the current recession, governments in the US and Canada have continued to cut taxes even as they borrow more money to stimulate the economy and encourage investment. When the need to address economic crisis comes up against the narrative of restraint, we have a battle of the paradigms and a debate among narratives: reduction vs. stimulus, spending vs. saving, and consumption vs. belt tightening.

These two 'alpha' narratives slide and grate against each other like the tectonic plates of modern discourse -- each winning for a time -- constantly erupting along the fault lines between them. The problem is that this can only go on for a short period of time.

### **The problem with relying on political leaders**

We tend to overestimate the ability of political leaders to make change in the midst of these warring paradigms. This is particularly apparent in the United States. "Our political system has

become a farce,” says business writer Brett Arends. “Neither party has any serious intention of dealing with the deficit. Witness the childish and surreal attitudes toward taxes ...”<sup>10</sup>

In *Third World America*,<sup>11</sup> Arianna Huffington exclusively turns to American political leaders to reverse the decline in living standards that she so amply illustrates. Rants against politicians fill the airwaves. But when two diametrically opposed visions ‘take each other on’, it is difficult to see how politicians will ever be in a position to resolve the debate. Visions are based on values and firmly held beliefs. It is a very tall order to ask our politicians to resolve these competing visions in democratic governments.

What is needed instead is the development of a more robust progressive narrative with the power to become accepted as conventional wisdom. That would enable political leaders to make change.

## **6. What the progressive narrative looks like in an emerging economy**

The African nation of Botswana aspires to achieve what we are in danger of letting go. It is making a difficult, yet miraculously peaceful, transition. The people of Botswana, who refer to themselves as *Batswana*, share a belief in *botho* – “one of the tenets of African culture [which] represents a social contract of mutual respect, responsibility and accountability that members of society have toward each other; one earns respect by respecting and empowering others.”<sup>12</sup> They have also re-invigorated their value of sustenance and self-reliance, *boipelego*.

Botswana’s government, public, and private sectors are shaped by Vision 2016.<sup>13</sup> Developed by a presidential taskforce in 1997, Vision 2016 provides a comprehensive blueprint for the nation. One would be hard-pressed to find a government document, budget, or program proposal written since then that does not reference at least one of the Vision 2016’s seven pillars, so well-known and strongly championed are they by the people of Botswana. The pillars include:

- An educated, informed nation
- A prosperous, productive and innovative nation
- A compassionate, just and caring nation
- A safe and secure nation

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10. <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/did-bonds-just-peak-2011-08-31>

11. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/third-world-america-chron\\_b\\_676474.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/third-world-america-chron_b_676474.html)

12. University of Botswana School of Graduate Studies “Botho and Vision 2016” in <http://www.ubotho.net/Botho-Vision2016>

13. See: <http://www.vision2016.co.bw>

- An open, democratic and accountable nation
- A moral and tolerant nation
- A united and proud nation

Under each pillar are several key indicators, marked by green, yellow and red triangles on the Vision 2016 website. These signify how much progress has been made in each. In reading these lists one is struck by how fundamental and essential these programs and services are.

### **The interplay of the private and public sectors in Botswana**

Fluidity between public and private is seen as part of the movement towards self-sustainability and independence from foreign aid. Companies go beyond simple ideas of corporate social responsibility and cheque-writing in Botswana and are involved in the development and management of programs typically run by the public sector in other countries.

Constraints on traditional funding sources – especially in newly-minted, middle-income economies like Botswana – require some innovative approaches to funding projects. Public/private partnerships allow for the delivery of vital services and infrastructure that might not be possible under limited government budgets.

Botswana has lost significant amounts of money from foreign donors as a new, middle-income country. In 2007, Botswana received \$4.5 million (USD) in aid, while countries such as Zambia received \$1.1 billion (USD).<sup>14</sup>

The African Comprehensive HIV/AIDS Partnership (ACHAP) is a good example of a successful public private partnership. Transit is provided through a public/private system with fares and routes regulated by government. Recycling is achieved through private collection designed to encourage entrepreneurship in rural areas. The President's request for housing demonstrates sector partnerships. There is a daily report in the national government newspaper on how much money and/or houses corporations have committed to donating or building "for needy Botswana."

There is organized labour and there are strikes in Botswana. These demonstrate the importance that Botswana place on income stability and government services over global economic concerns and debt. They are not willing to allow the narrative of global debt to affect the way their government runs and provides for its people.

Botswana struggles to collect taxes, which are currently 16.4% of GDP.<sup>15</sup> Yet there is some evidence that there is a much greater acceptance of the idea of taxation in Botswana than other countries, such as South Africa. Faith that the government is there to care for the people, combined with low levels of perceived and actual corruption, build confidence in the idea that paying taxes is worthwhile.

14. Nkala, Gideon (2009, May 19). Botswana Getting Little Foreign Aid  
<http://mmegei.bw/index.php?sid=4&aid=20&dir=2009/May/Monday18>

15. Volkerink, B. (2009), Tax Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa. Center for Taxation and Public Governance at the Utrecht School of Law, p. 22

## The family economy

Families in Botswana share their resources – be it money, land, or food – with others in times of need. When paycheques are released at the end of the month, the first priority is not saving, but ensuring that everyone in the family has what they need and is taken care of.

It is not uncommon for individuals to run out of money towards the end of the month, but there is no panic as accounts run dry. In an arid country prone to drought, one has to have faith that the rain will come. And in Botswana it is easy to maintain faith that money will come again with families and friends ready and willing to support each other in the meantime.

Instead of withholding money in times of need, the Botswana family invests in what is important. They are willing to place money on the futures of their families knowing that all will be better off for it in the long run.

The responsible Botswana family buys land but builds their home slowly over many years. Even though it will take time, they invest money in good property, good labour and good products. It is an investment in their family and their future. It is an investment, they think, that will eventually lead them to a lifestyle similar to those led by people in America and Canada and Europe.

## The Botswana narrative

*"The lofty and ambitious targets we set for ourselves will come with many challenges, some of which we cannot anticipate today. We must be prepared for continuous innovation, resilience, commitment and fortitude. To compete successfully we must instil a greater sense of urgency in our society.*

*We have to be dedicated to shaping the destiny of our country. Nobody will do it for us.*

*We must discipline ourselves to change in whatever way is necessary for us to achieve the goals of this Vision. Some of the changes that will be required will entail effort and hardship. They will be rewarded by an improvement in the lives of all Batswana. Failure to look and move forward now could condemn Botswana to social, economic and cultural stagnation, and long term underdevelopment."<sup>16</sup>*

The Botswana narrative of progress fits the general parameters of Galbraith's conventional wisdom. The message is easy to grasp: *nobody will do it for us*. And it is immensely self-esteem enhancing: *we will shape our own destiny*.

Are the ideas in this message “comfortable” in the way that Galbraith meant when he said that conventional wisdom “promises best to avoid awkward effort of unwelcome dislocation of life”? Perhaps not, but then, in a poor nation, the baseline is often unwelcome dislocation. A promise

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16. Presidential Task Group on a Long Term Vision for Botswana, A Long Term Vision for Botswana, 2007, p. 4  
[http://www.vision2016.co.bw/tempimg/media/mediac\\_102.pdf](http://www.vision2016.co.bw/tempimg/media/mediac_102.pdf)

that “effort and hardship” will bring a better standard of living might be seen as comforting indeed, and an affirmation of shared values.

## 7. What would a robust progressive narrative look like in Canada today?

The private abundance and public scarcity frame of reference has successfully taken hold as conventional wisdom. All public spending is seen as evidence of ‘gravy’ and all taxes are an assault on private abundance.

Progressive messaging is often ineffective in countering the conventional wisdom. Often that is because it flies in the face of Galbraith’s three tenets. It is neither comfortable, nor easy to grasp, nor self-esteem enhancing.

When the dominant narrative says, “The war on the car is over,” it is not enough to counter with “We should all be less comfortable.”

When the dominant narrative is simple and easy to understand – “Less government means lower taxes,” it is ineffective to counter with “Actually, it’s really complicated.”

And when the dominant narrative exalts the virtue of self-interest, it is not self-esteem-enhancing to counter with “We are on the verge of destroying ourselves.”

Is there a way to use Galbraith’s tenets to forge a new frame, one of both private and public abundance? There has been some powerful messaging in Canadian politics recently that has challenged the conventional framework. We can see this most easily, perhaps, in the way Canadians embraced a final public letter from the late Jack Layton:<sup>17</sup>

### ***Comfortable:***

*My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic.*

### ***Easy to grasp:***

*We can build a prosperous economy and a society that shares its benefits more fairly. We can look after our seniors. We can offer better futures for our children. We can do our part to save the world’s environment. We can restore our good name in the world.*

### ***Self-esteem enhancing:***

*Remember our proud history of social justice, universal health care, public pensions and making sure no one is left behind. Let’s continue to move forward ... Canada is a great country, one of the hopes of the world. We can be a better one – a country of greater equality, justice, and opportunity.*

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17. A letter to Canadians from the Honourable Jack Layton, August 20, 2011  
<http://www.ndp.ca/letter-to-canadians-from-jack-layton>

Jack Layton did not personally construct the vision that he describes in his final letter. That vision arose out of the toils of a number of progressive movements. But in the course of his final political campaign, Layton succeeded in weaving it into a progressive narrative that felt a lot like conventional wisdom.

A successful progressive narrative must be based on values. It must capture the imagination of youth. It must be angry when it needs to be. But more than anything else, it must have the attributes that Galbraith ascribed to conventional wisdom. It must offer the comfort of shared values within a well-understood frame. And it must allow us to feel good about ourselves.

The political right gets this. In a civil society built on choice, other points on the political spectrum need to do no less.

**John Stapleton**  
November, 2011

John Stapleton worked for the Ontario Government in the Ministry of Community and Social Services and its predecessors for 28 years in the areas of social assistance policy and operations. During his career, John was the senior policy advisor to the Social Assistance Review Committee and the Minister's Advisory Group on New Legislation. His more recent government work concerned the implementation of the National Child Benefit.

He is a Commissioner with the Ontario Soldiers' Aid Commission and is a volunteer with St. Christopher House and Woodgreen Community Services of Toronto. John was Research Director for the Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults in Toronto and was the co-chair of the working group associated with this project. He is undertaking an Innovations Fellowship with the Metcalf Foundation. He teaches public policy and is a member of 25 in 5.

John has published op-eds in the Globe & Mail, National Post and the Toronto Star. He has written reviews for the Literary Review of Canada and written articles and studies for Ideas that Matter, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the C.D. Howe Institute, the Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation, the Caledon Institute, The Toronto Dominion Financial Group, the Metcalf Foundation, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, The Toronto City Summit Alliance and many others.

John serves on the Board of Directors of the Daily Bread Food Bank and he is the President of the Canadian Horseracing Hall of Fame.