

A Dwindling Rural Population with Increasing Responsibility

by Ralph C. Martin

“Today cities are crucibles of ingenuity and productivity generating more than 80% of the world’s patents and about 80% of global GDP. Urban dwellers tend to be happier, healthier, better educated and more prosperous than their rural counterparts.”

Robert Muggah, Globe and Mail, June 17, 2017.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/tackling-global-problems-look-to-cities-not-countries/article35330858/>

Muggah’s quote begs the question, why don’t we all move to cities? I recall a wizened refugee from GTA, who had retired in Muskoka, sighing in relief and saying, “I’m happy that so many people want to live in Toronto. Then I don’t have to.”

Across the globe more than half the human population has been living in cities for at least 10 years. According to the 2016 census, more than one third of Canadians now live in just three cities; Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. About 82 per cent of Canucks reside in large and medium-sized cities. The average age in rural areas is rising faster than in cities, and immigrants, many of them of a younger demographic, are drawn to cities.

Richard Florida at the Martin Prosperity Institute within the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management proposes that a new or emergent class—or demographic segment made up of knowledge workers, intellectuals and various types of artists—is an ascendant economic force, representing either a major shift away from traditional agriculture- or industry-based economies or a general restructuring into more complex economic hierarchies in cities.

Florida and others argue that “the Global Creativity Index (GCI) is a broad-based measure for advanced economic growth and sustainable prosperity based on the 3Ts of economic development — talent, technology, and tolerance. In 2015, Canada ranked first in tolerance and fourth overall... Creativity is also closely connected to urbanization, with more urbanized nations scoring higher on the GCI.” <http://martinprosperity.org/content/the-global-creativity-index-2015/>

Does this mean that creativity in the countryside is deficient? The averages of various measurements underwrite a disturbing story. On the other hand, my personal rural connections

remind me over and over, how much creativity, grounded in common sense, prevails in rural Canada. For example, a farm couple near Thunder Bay, successfully raise sheep in a habitat of wolves, coyotes and bears. They designed a configuration for a unique, cost-effective electric fence that does a fine job with just a bit of support from occasional live rounds fired from the front porch. Lamb sales are humming and the predators balance their diets with wild prey.

Technology is gaining traction in farming, forestry and fishing, three of the basic industries that helped this country grow. Bright young practitioners are talented at adopting technologies to improve economic opportunities and prosperity in rural sectors.

However, as in urban areas, automation is displacing rural people who are skilled in traditional tasks. Those with connections and capital tend to thrive. Others are struggling.

Wendell Berry, a rural farmer and poet has advocated for a higher eyes-to-acres ratio. His caution is that more machinery and sensors will not adequately replace old fashioned observations and inferences. The challenge is to keep rural people engaged with their eyes, synthesizing proficiencies, relational awareness and respectful attitudes. How do we notice what is really happening and adjust, as required?

The Global Creativity Index scores Canada as the top country in tolerance, with the implication that our cities boosted us to the summit. Perhaps some aspects of tolerance do improve as varying types of people continuously rub elbows in cities. They learn to accept each other and get on with the tasks at hand, especially when there are plenty of tasks to manage in a wealthy nation's economy.

Rural resilience and relationships of rural people with other people, animals, plants and ecosystems may be strengthened by the repetitive hammering of expectations for the transfer of cheap and plentiful resources, and talented rural youth to urban areas, against the anvil of what rural Canada can sustain.

Cities are seductive magnets. And yet, the future of civilization hinges on the observations, relationships and actions of engaged rural realists.

The 18% remaining in rural Canada support the rest of us in ways we are slow to appreciate. To sustain happy, healthy, well-educated and prosperous urbanites, requires the awareness, skills, creativity, and even tolerance of rural stalwarts, with the understanding to harvest sustainably. The 82% who are urbanites will do well to adjust consumption to what is adequate.

Murray McLauchlan got it right when he sang
“These days when everyone's taking so much,
There's somebody giving back in....
Thanks for the meal here's a song that is real,
From a kid from the city to you”

Ralph C. Martin, Ph.D., P.Ag., Professor, University of Guelph. Comments welcome at
rcmartin@uoguelph.ca