

Ethics Call Us to Do Better in Government

By Goldwin Emerson

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Most Canadians feel proud of our country and we feel privileged to live here. We know that each year, thousands of people from other countries would like to immigrate to Canada and enjoy the advantages of health care, a good legal system, and the civility that most of us experience as Canadians.

It is within this broad range of good feelings about Canada that I want to raise some issues concerning where we might do even better to enhance Canadian living. In an ethical sense, as in biblical terms, (Luke12:48), “to those to whom much is given, much is expected”. Preceding Christianity, Plato cautioned in *The Republic* that justice and ethical behavior demands that leaders should share the resources of a country to maximize the welfare of all citizens. But in order for improvements to be achieved, we as citizens need to make wise choices in selecting leaders who have vision and a good ethical compass..

Canada is blessed with rich resources in minerals, fertile soil, and more lakes and fresh clean water than nearly every other country in the world. Over the years these conditions have made it possible for our leaders to assume a rather relaxed view of their responsibilities. Not many years ago, Canada was rated in the top three or four countries in the world as having the highest standard of living. Much of the past financial “success” for Canada has come at the expense of selling our minerals, lumber, oil, and other natural resources to foreign countries. It is ironic that, in many cases, foreign markets sell these same materials back to Canadians as finished products. We have been perhaps short-sighted, in taking a *laissez-faire* approach by using up our natural resources rather than developing them and creating our own Canadian owned industries. Many of our previously owned Canadian businesses have now been taken over by large foreign owned corporations.

One indicator of how our country presently measures up to other countries can be found in the reports of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD). Canada is one of the thirty-four members of OECD. The OECD reports are useful in keeping Canadians informed about our economic performance. According to OECD reports for 2012, Canadians are generally doing well in many areas. However, there are some areas where more attention is needed. Using “A” as the top rating among OECD countries, Canada rates high in life satisfaction, low suicide rates, inflation control, university education, literacy rates, and lower than average poverty among our elderly.

“B” is a moderately good rating where some improvement could be achieved. OECD rates Canada “B” in solving its economic disparities between rich and poor, and in its economic performance in response to the general 2008 economic down turn.

“C” indicates fair performance suggesting areas where Canada should do better. Canada has not developed strong global marketing. Since the 1980s, hundreds of Canadian owned businesses have been taken over by foreign owned corporations. Furthermore, we tend to over-consume energy and produce more waste than what is environmentally desirable.

The “D” category suggests poorer than expected performance in a few, but not many areas. Canada lacks innovative research developing and promoting strong global markets for our resources. Also mentioned is the matter of child poverty. In this case, “poverty” is used as a collective term which includes the lack of wholesome food, use of food banks, and the accompanying children’s poorer physical and mental development. For a more complete view, Glen Pearson, Co-Director of the London Food Bank, sets out a thoughtful list of the symptoms of poverty in his London Free Press article of January 4, 2014.

In fairness, I should say, that generally, the OECD member countries are doing well in comparison to many parts of the world outside the OECD membership. Ethically, we ought to do a better job of promoting Canada towards one of the top OECD countries. Morally, we owe it to our children to leave Canada in as good a position as it can be considering the abundant natural resources we have available in Canada. A good beginning would be for Canadians to select wise environmental leaders, knowledgeable entrepreneurs, and ethical politicians.