

REVIEW • FORUM

Doug Saunders' *Maximum Canada*¹**The end (of growth) is nigh**

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Doug Saunders' *Maximum Canada* is an excellent, well-researched book about an idea whose time has gone.

Saunders argues that Canada's national development has been stunted, like an undernourished orphan, by a variety of circumstances and purposeful politics. Much of Canada's colonial and even post-confederation history has seen the nation seemingly "making a concerted effort to be small in size and limited in function" (p. 8). One consequence is that even as late as the 19th century—while Europe was disgorging an unprecedented 40 million immigrants into the New World, and the world as a whole was "enjoying" an unprecedented population boom—Canada bled more people to other countries, particularly the United States, than it welcomed as immigrants.

Indeed, the fact that Canada "has long had trouble keeping people" (p. 8) provides the starting point for Saunders' analysis. The nation will remain underweight as long as it remains underpopulated; and to create a diverse self-reliant economy and maintain a credible role on the world stage, it must attract more people and learn to retain its most gifted citizens.

For early Canada-to-be, the main organizing question was whether to serve mainly as a subservient provider of unprocessed resources for its overseas masters or strive for a more diverse economy and greater independence. Saunders weaves a necessarily convoluted tale, in which the emerging nation lurches between these divergent poles—buffeted by external events, colonial mandates, and the personal beliefs of those in power. Regardless of which vision was in ascendance, however, the relevant authorities recognized underpopulation as being problematic for achieving their specific goals.

Perhaps the first hint of trouble ahead followed from the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which encouraged the northward migration of settlers from the Thirteen Colonies of British America. The resultant trickle of ambitious American immigrants soon chafed under the restrictive economic and political conditions imposed by Britain over the Province of Quebec (formerly New France's colony of Canada) and Nova Scotia (Acadia), newly acquired from France. Meanwhile, the British became apprehensive over the potential long-term threat to their hegemony posed by the dynamism and entrepreneurial sensibilities of the new arrivals.

The subsequent flood of American migrants during and after the war of independence exacerbated this fundamental tension. Britain's suspicion of Americans' zest for commerce; her fear that the rebellious spirit of the new settlers would feed the desire for greater autonomy in the Canadas; and the growing economic clout of the United States itself precipitated furious debate

1. *Maximum Canada: Why 35 Million Canadians Are Not Enough* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2017). ISBN 978-0-7352-7309-2. Softcover C\$29.95, 247 pp.

in the Parliament of Great Britain. Overwhelming nascent liberal leanings, Britain followed its Tory instincts and resolved to “lock down” the Americans by restricting their trade and marine commerce, and to reward Canada’s loyalists by consolidating their role as exclusive providers of lumber, grain, fish, and other resources to Britain.

These actions helped to precipitate the war of 1812 and, soon after, to consolidate a set of ideas on the British side into what Saunders refers to as Canada’s “minimizing impulse.” Fearful of their own people, the colonial rulers were now determined “to prevent Canada from becoming anything like the United States” and “erect a set of barriers between their subjects and the fast-expanding North American culture and economy” (p. 27–28).

The minimizing impulse had several core elements: *restrictive immigration* favouring mainly white Western Europeans (Saunders’ account is of an alarmingly racist Canada); *an official desire for ethnic homogeneity*, preferably British Anglican; *a simple resource-based economy* in the service of imperial Britain; *restricted relations with the United States*; a perception of *indigenous-people-as-problem* subject to paternalistic control; and *chronic underpopulation*, mostly as a result of the previous elements.

The minimizing impulse became Canada’s dominant governing framework throughout the 19th and much of the 20th centuries, driving out many of her most gifted citizens and retarding national development. Not until the fractious years following the nation’s 1967 Centennial did it show signs of collapsing under the cumulative weight of bigger ideas. Significantly, these ideas “weren’t coming from parliament or the courts; they were becoming imbedded in public thought as the collective results of twenty million lived experiences” (p. 123). Canada’s colonial mentality was finally dissipating, enabling the full emergence of a new “maximizing impulse.”

The maximizing impulse inverted the minimizing variety: *Pluralism and ethnic heterogeneity* recognizes that Canada’s *de facto* core values and institutions are independent of ethnic, religious, or racial identities; *broadly based expansionist immigration* fosters economic diversity and population growth; *a diversified value-added economy* recognizes that the manufacturing, high-end service, and knowledge-based sectors are essential to the nation’s self-reliance and independence; *free trade and greater economic integration within North America* acknowledge the natural north–south flow of goods and services and the waning of ties to Britain; seeing *First Nations as sovereign partners* recognizes their constitutional and additional legal rights as defined in the treaties; and, most importantly, *a growing population* facilitates further development.

Indeed, Saunders’ central thesis is that a greater population is necessary to create adequate concentrations of people and sufficient economies of scale to ensure the cultural, entrepreneurial, economic, and fiscal vitality of any more-or-less self-reliant country. The final sections of *Maximum Canada* therefore provide a balanced rationale for policies geared toward enabling Canada to nearly treble its 2018 population, to 100 million by the end of the century. Chapter 6 details the continuing public, private, ecological, strategic, and cultural costs of underpopulation and, by implication, the benefits of overcoming them. Saunders’ obvious expansionist bias does not prevent chapter 7 from outlining possible barriers to success. Do we have the developmental skills and opportunities to accommodate triple our present number of workers? Can our urban infrastructure adapt to the high densities required for an ecologically sound tripling of the population? Will we invest adequately in human capital to enable new citizens to realize their full potential? Most importantly, will Canada be able to avoid a backlash among old Canadians as we attempt to integrate expanding numbers of new Canadians? These are indeed important questions, and Saunders freely admits that “the 100-million plan is probably best rejected if Canada is not willing to make investments and take precautions in advance to ensure that the system continues to function well” (p. 211).

This brings us to what may be the biggest deficiency in Saunders' expansionist thesis. *Maximum Canada* virtually ignores contemporary biophysical reality and assumes that the *global* long term will unfold more or less as a smooth extension of the recent past. These are potentially fatal flaws.

Consider that it took all of human evolutionary history (about 200,000 years) for the world's population to reach 1 billion in the early 1800s, but only 200 years—1/1000th as much time—to expand to today's 7.6 billion! Meanwhile, material demand on the planet ballooned even more—real global GDP has increased 100-fold since 1800, and average per-capita incomes by a factor of 13 (rising 25-fold in the richest countries).² Consequently, consumption has exploded hyper-exponentially: half of the fossil fuels and many other resources ever used by humans have been consumed in just the past 40 years! The result? Techno-industrial society is in overshoot, using even renewable resources and natural sinks beyond the regenerative and assimilative capacity of ecosystems (WWF 2016; Steffen et al. 2007; Rockström et al. 2009).

Three observations should be drawn here. First, the recent spurt of population and economic growth that we take to be the norm is actually the most *anomalous* period in human evolutionary history. Second, this explosion of enterprise and population got underway precisely when Saunders' "minimizing impulse" was securing its grip on Canada. Third, the phenomenon is unrepeatable—*the ship of unconstrained growth has sailed, arguably having left Canada stranded on the dock.*

The problem is that if prevailing growth trends continue, they will likely lead *in this century* to runaway climate change, the collapse of major biophysical systems, food shortages, global strife, and generally diminished prospects for global civilization (Barnosky et al. 2012). As early as 1992, the world's top scientists issued a *Warning to Humanity*³ that "a great change in our stewardship of the Earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided"; a second notice, issued on 13 November 2017, stated that most of the negative trends identified 25 years earlier "are getting far worse."⁴ By ignoring such warnings the world invites an era of geopolitical chaos and forced de-growth. This is hardly a propitious time to advocate a 65-million increase in the population of a nation whose citizens consume four or five times more energy and resources than the world average and have among the world's largest per capita ecological footprints (Rees 2013).

Despite this weakness, Doug Saunders' *Maximum Canada* is a fascinating, well-written, and readily accessible tale that leaves us asking what the nation might have become had its maximizing impulse prevailed from the outset. (Keep in mind that we have actually done rather well in the past half-century, while United States society is arguably in steep decline.) But *Maximum Canada* also leaves us wondering what to do now. Science tells us, "The future ain't what it used to be." How might Saunders' vision change were he to account for current ecological realities and likely future prospects? What if, for example, the main driver of national population growth in coming decades is an irresistible flood of desperate, mostly impoverished refugees, fleeing from flooding coastlines, spreading deserts, encroaching famine, and geopolitical strife?

How then to "maximize" Canada?

2. <https://ourworldindata.org/economic-growth>

3. <http://www.ucsusa.org/about/1992-world-scientists.html#.WguS5miPIdU>

4. <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/doi/10.1093/biosci/bix125/4605229>

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