LOBE EDITORIAL

Five conversations Canadians need to have in 2015

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Canada is one of the world’s richest, safest, fairest, most peaceful and best-governed countries. Graded on the curve, this country comes out near the top, and always has. But graded on an absolute scale, there’s a lot of room for improvement.

Canada’s success is partly a happy accident: We can thank sheer luck for our natural resources, the parliamentary and legal systems we inherited, and sharing the world’s longest undefended border with the planet’s most dynamic culture and economy. Canada got to be Canada in part by winning the global lottery. But this country’s success is also the product of good choices.

Canada has a history of thoughtful arguments over big issues – battles of ideas, powered by reason and evidence, and not just shouting matches. Think of the creation of medicare. Think of free trade. The policy choices that came out of those debates made a better Canada. And the more Canadians can have intelligent, honest conversations about today’s big issues, the better choices this country will make.

In 2015, here are some conversations Canadians need to have:

**Crime and punishment:** This country avoided many of the mistakes of a U.S. justice system that is often brutal and counterproductive. But cases like those of Ashley Smith and Edward Snowshoe, whose difficult lives were worsened and ultimately ended by solitary confinement and misguided attempts at correction, should remind Canadians that our system is far from perfect, and may be getting worse.

Consider: A high percentage of the people behind bars have serious mental health issues. Is more punishment going to cure them? Is more or less treatment going to help?

Consider: Almost everyone who is behind bars is going to get out. Their sentences are not forever, and they will soon walk the same streets as you. They will soon be your neighbours. Would doing more to educate, treat and humanize them help them become good neighbours? Or would worsening their conditions of incarceration be more likely to produce peaceful, model citizens?

We need to have a rational conversation about this.

**Pipelines:** Not every pipeline proposal deserves a green light. (This space has had reservations about the Northern Gateway project, for example.) But unless you’re planning on outlawing motor vehicles and shutting down the oil industry, you need to use and move oil. Pipe is generally the most efficient and safe way to do it. Thousands upon thousands of miles of pipe already criss-cross the continent. Ever more oil is being produced in both Canada and the U.S. – all of which has to be moved. Much of this new North American oil is displacing oil that is already moving by rail, or being imported by ship from across the ocean.

In parts of Canada, the discussion around all of this is sometimes detached from that reality. For example, Ontario and Quebec are not currently oil-free zones, in case anyone driving their Range Rover to an environmental protest needs to be reminded. New pipe from the West means replacing oil that has long arrived from overseas. And some of those ships bringing oil to Canada may soon reverse the flow, carrying Canadian oil across the sea from the same ports in Quebec and New Brunswick. All of this has to be done to the highest environmental standards. But Canada is not an oil virgin, and we can’t have any honest conversation if we pretend otherwise.

**Climate change:** The right is right about pipelines – but the left is correct about climate change. The thing is, it’s possible for Canada to have an oil industry, and pipelines, and to also take significant steps to reduce global warming. There’s no necessary contradiction. In fact, people on the right – see Preston Manning’s recent comments in support of carbon taxes – are starting to realize that caring about pollution shouldn’t be left to the left. It could easily be turned into a right-wing issue. Or – let us dream a little – a non-partisan issue.

We think British Columbia’s carbon tax, which involves taxing fuels like gasoline while equally lowering income and other taxes, is the way to go. It cut B.C.’s carbon emissions by much more than the national average even as B.C.’s economy grew faster than the national average.

The B.C. model is just one of many. But the basic idea of putting higher taxes on things we want less of, like pollution, and lowering taxes on things we want more of – income, investment, savings – is something Conservatives, Liberals, New Democrats and Greens should all be able to support.

After all, who’s in favour of raising taxes on income and lowering taxes on pollution? Anyone?

**Aboriginal Canada:** This country needs an honest conversation about how to lift up native Canadians, so the average aboriginal Canadian enjoys the same standard of living as the average Canadian. That discussion will raise uncomfortable questions for federal and provincial governments. But it will also put unsettling questions to Canada’s native leadership, which sometimes acts as if the solution lies in moving native Canada back to the 15th century, and not forward into the 21st.

**Policing**: You cannot have law without police, but neither can you have police who are above the law, or a public perception that they might be. Any measures of greater police oversight– such as the wearing of body cameras by officers, as this page has called for – is not about punishing or undermining police officers. It is not about siding with criminals. It is about ensuring that everyone in society respects the law, especially those who are sworn to uphold it. That’s a good place to start a conversation.