Reinventing Canada

Darrell Bricker
CEO, Ipsos Public Affairs Worldwide

Bricker began by confessing to be intimidated by the audience, all of whom he regarded as being more educated and experienced in the matters he would be discussing. He added that his interpretation of those matters might be at odds with some members of the audience, a result that has become his stock and trade, as evidenced by his new book, *The Big Shift*. He recalled the inspiration after witnessing the 2011 federal election, which defied the expectations and predictions of many well established observers.

"When John Ibbitson and I wrote *The Big Shift*, it was to start a conversation, not end it," he said. "It was to politely grab the people who comment on Canada by the lapels and give them a little bit of a shake." The concern, he maintained, is that many of these presumably informed commentators are missing major changes affecting the Canadian economy and society.

By way of demonstrating just how many of us may be missing those changes, he offered "So you think you know Canada?", a series of assertions about various parts of the country. He asked the audience to compare their own perceptions of which parts of the country support measures such as the decriminalization of marijuana with the results of detailed polling data (most thought it would be British Columbia, but it is in fact the Maritimes). After a number of these examples, it was clear to everyone that the caricatures we often employ to describe the country are not just superficial, but often just plain wrong.

"Immigration policy in Canada used to be about compassion. It's now about economic necessity. And in the last 20 years it's gone through that transition." — Darrell Bricker, CEO, Ipsos Public Affairs Worldwide

"All of this means that making assumptions leads to stereotypes, which can also lead to bad decisions," he said, moving to demographic information that can be no less surprising in its implications. For example, Bricker revealed that 80% of Canadians use the Internet every day for something other than work, compared with a global average of around 30%. "Canada is one of the most wired countries in the world," he said. "They say about Europe that is has too much history and Canada has too much geography. The way that we deal with it is through technology. If you don't have a strong on-line strategy, in just about every capacity of Canadian life today whether you're a retailer or a government, you're missing your entire market." Even doctors, he noted, will admit that many of their patients arrive better educated by the Web about particular ailments than they are.

He outlined other trends in areas such as employment, trade, and government spending. He also reminded the audience that a population the size of Toronto is now emigrating to Canada every decade, and settling disproportionately in southern Ontario and the West. "That has huge implications for every aspect of our lives," he argued. "But you wouldn't know it, for example, looking around this room."

He portrayed the country's approach to newcomers as one of our greatest strengths. "One of the biggest innovations we've made over the last 50 years is a combination of a liberal immigration policy and multiculturalism," he said. "We figured out a way to get people to the country and welcome them here when they come. Some of our biggest competitors in the world have not figured either one of these things out." This approach, which was once characterized by Canada as a haven for refugees and reunifying families, has become an instrument of economic policy, although the country is currently accepting more immigrants in all categories than it has ever done.

He defined Canada's changing relationship with the rest of the world as the essence of the big shift from which his book takes its title. "It's the confluence of global trends, the movement of money and people," he said. "The effects here aren't just for Canada, but the entire world." Our ability to draw large numbers of immigrants puts us ahead of many countries, and enables us to keep up with trends such as the rising levels of skilled labour to

be found in Asia, as opposed to Europe.

Bricker also dealt with changes in the Canadian political landscape, the consumer economy, and the educational system. He noted a growing economic optimism that flies in the face of assertions that Canada is simply a smaller version of the United States; it is clear that we have some lessons to teach the Americans about how to manage the economy, for instance. Conversely, challenges being faced by the United States are not necessarily the same as those we must face.

He took questions afterward, fielding opinions about the prospect that Justin Trudeau could revive the Liberal party sufficiently to unseat the Conservatives. Similarly, he noted that as controversial a figure as Toronto Mayor Rob Ford represented a key trend that was driving the rise of right wing politics, specifically "the suburbs beating up downtown".

"There are only certain parts of the world that are actually producing the people who are going to be the workers of the future and only certain parts of the world that have economic power right now and actually have some incentive. This has caused massive changes in a lot of countries, but especially in Canada, as we move from being an Atlantic country to being a Pacific country." — Darrell Bricker, CEO, Ipsos Public Affairs Worldwide

He was also asked about the implications of demographic change and immigration. "One of the biggest challenges that we have economically is to keep this progress going, and bringing in enough people to keep it going," he said, adding that the apparent success story of China threatens to be undone by the rapid aging and declining birth rate of its own population.

He acknowledged that unexpected technological changes could transform the way we view particular skills and economic constraints, but he insisted that planning should be based on what we definitely know now. "The demand for knowledge and information will continue to rise," he said. "The pressure on people in the workforce to be knowledgeable will be even greater. We're going to continue to be in this competition, and increasingly a more difficult competition, for access to skilled workers from around the world, unless we start doing a better job of making our own."