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Seven Years On and Seven Years Out: Revisiting “Patterns, Principles and Practices in Social Innovation”

By Stephen Huddart

This article is the second in a [series](#) on social innovation.

“This is an extraordinary time full of vital, transformative movements that could not be foreseen. It’s also a nightmarish time. Full engagement requires the ability to perceive both.”– Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*

Introduction

In 2010, *The Philanthropist* published several articles on social innovation, including one by me entitled “[Patterns, Principles and Practices in Social Innovation](#).” The article was a compilation of ideas, initiatives, and emerging trends in social innovation in Canada, written from my perspective as Chief Operating Officer of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Three years earlier, the Foundation’s CEO at the time, Tim Brodhead, set McConnell on a course to become a leading proponent and practitioner of social innovation, through the creation of [Social Innovation Generation](#) (SiG).

Would it be useful or interesting to revisit the paper seven years later? Perhaps, but rather than tally up what was right, wrong, or irrelevant about it, I propose to delve into critical changes in context and new challenges that have emerged over the past seven years, before proposing strategies for moving forward, principally through a resetting of the relationship between civil society and the public sector, along with participation in global networks.

Social innovation mindsets have evolved and spread since 2010, embracing complexity, scale, and systems perspectives. Where we once laboured to communicate and explain the term “social innovation,” it is now in wide usage, even if its exact meaning is still debated. *The Economist* recently published a [global social innovation index](#). New tools have emerged, including social innovation labs, which are proliferating globally, especially in the public sector. A growing number of social innovation leadership and training initiatives now exist, including Suncor Energy Foundation’s Banff summer residency, as well as teaching and research programs at the University of Waterloo, Simon Fraser

University, Queen's University, Mount Royal University, and the University of Toronto. They are joined by social enterprise incubators in schools across the country. Philanthropy, too, is evolving, with several new funder affinity groups, co-location efforts like Foundation House in Toronto, and growing participation in impact investing.

Most importantly, we have collectively deepened our capacity to address issues such as the future of our food supply, Indigenous reconciliation, and climate change.

While these are positive developments, social innovation is still the Cinderella of an innovation sisterhood that includes business, science, and technology innovation. Apart from progress among provinces — such as British Columbia's Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, Ontario's [social enterprise strategy](#), or Saskatchewan's hub model, described later — universities, non-profits, and foundations have largely driven growth in social innovation. As Tim Draimin and Kelsey Spitz (2017) of SiG [have pointed out](#), despite mention of social innovation in the mandate letters of several ministers, the federal government has been slow to act.

While the value of innovation in business, science, and technology is widely championed and generously funded, considerably less attention is paid to applying innovation tools to the social systems that cost government more than \$300 billion a year. This is not some neo-liberal wolf in sheep's clothing. Improving outcomes for vulnerable people; creating agile, responsive institutions; and unlocking capital that is currently absorbed by service delivery models that worsen problems they were intended to solve (as is the case with some incarceration practices, for example), are goals we can all support, and which social innovation is designed to achieve.

Another way to look at this is through the lens of the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#), adopted by the 193 member countries of the UN General Assembly on September 25, 2015. Achieving them by 2030, as Canada has committed to doing, will take ingenuity, experimentation, and money.

Spending more on social research and development (R&D), and on scaling up viable solutions, is something that both government and philanthropy can support. Successfully shifting large systems requires trial and error – a climate in which we not only permit, but also expect, experimentation and mistakes. The fact that foundations are supposed to give money away without expectation of financial return confers upon them a valuable role in creating the conditions for social innovation to thrive – and even better, should they lose money on program-related investments, they are allowed to count such losses as grants.

Another way to improve our social infrastructure is to reshape the civic footprint of the health and education sectors. Hosting “centres for useful evidence,” for example, as the UK does with its [What Works Network](#), would ensure that stakeholders monitor research on critical issues, and translate it into lay language that is made available to policymakers, practitioners, the private sector, and the public. Universities, colleges, and hospitals can also generate social impact via responsible investment and social purchasing policies.

In a similar vein, introducing the means to sustain social innovation in social service organizations can improve outcomes and often reduce costs. The work of the service design agency [InWithForward](#) exemplifies this approach. It uses ethnography and social lab prototyping to challenge assumptions and disrupt the status quo, replacing stifling routines with active learning and innovation.

Challenge prizes, structured to integrate social, business, science, and technology innovation, as [Grand Challenges Canada](#) does for maternal and child health in the developing world, are another means of bringing about change at multiple scales.

To guide and coordinate this work, we need advisory platforms that span sectors, connecting diverse constituencies to enable long-term, systemic thinking — as the Public Policy Forum and SiG have begun to do with government and civil society participants in the nascent Social Innovation Accelerator Network.

Another way to effect a cultural shift in the way we collaborate is to convene people from across the systems we engage with for deeper thinking and co-creation, using such tools as the [Art of Hosting](#), in natural settings conducive to reflection and imagination. We can begin to speak about a “philanthropy of place” developing in such settings as [Hollyhock](#), [the Banff Centre](#), [Wasan Island](#), or [Windhorse Farm](#). Indigenous innovation is also shaping these ways, in settings like [Turtle Lodge](#).

It should be clear that civil society does not “own” social innovation. To attain the SDGs, it is time to scale social innovation itself. This means working with governments, including Indigenous peoples; the private sector; education and health care systems; the professions; farmers and our food system; and the media — both within Canada and at a global scale.

Social innovation’s changed context

The following developments are reshaping social innovation’s operating environment, and point to areas for further work:

Hard truths in a post-truth era

Two thousand years ago, Aeschylus observed that in war, the first casualty is truth. We now know that in the lead-up to both the Brexit vote and the election of Donald J. Trump in the United States, shadowy organizations used psychographic data, social media algorithms, outright lies, and political bombast to displace truth and rational discourse, with implications that become clearer by the day. What is not so clear is what war is being waged.

My 2010 paper correctly, but somewhat naively, stated “Anyone can get started with cloud computing by creating a free Google site and inviting others to collaborate.” I also wrote, “A great deal of social innovation is technology-enabled, [generating] enormous potential as well as occasional friction between old and new.” Now that Google and Facebook make profitable use of the massive amounts of data that we freely offer up about ourselves, the hard question we have to ask is, “when ‘free’ comes at a cost to freedom, what are social innovators going to do about it?”

Even before recent events, there were critics who felt that social innovation was becoming synonymous with “social change lite,” emphasizing process over outcomes, and bypassing serious, sustained work on social justice issues. The [Young Foundation](#) in the UK — one of social innovation’s early champions — began to use the phrase “disruptive social innovation” to put a sharper edge on what was becoming a fuzzy concept applied to almost any incremental change.

Today we face two risks. One is that we fail to focus and organize, and thereby lose momentum in

meeting the SDGs. Along with resisting those who would undermine efforts to address climate change, it is important to sustain multilateral approaches to solving global problems. This is where SIX — [the Social Innovation Exchange](#) — has a role to play, as the world’s pre-eminent social innovation network. It convenes governments, businesses, academics, funders, practitioners, and intermediaries for networked learning, foresight, and collaboration. A question for us in Canada is whether to create a formal node(s) in the SIX network, particularly as we plan to sunset the current work of SiG at the end of 2017.

Another risk is that we duck our heads when it’s time to speak up about public policy, for fear of contravening the arcane and undemocratic dictates of the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). There is growing consensus that government should audit foundations and charities for financial integrity, and not for activities undertaken in pursuit of their missions. Given our responsibility for advancing the public benefit, perhaps government should hold us accountable for spending a *minimum* of 10% of our resources on policy advocacy, as opposed to the maximum 10% that is currently the case. As I hope will become clear, dealing with the political advocacy issue is only the beginning of what should be a broader reshaping of the relationship between government and civil society.

Winners, losers, and social innovation’s dark side

My 2010 article predicted: “The combination of burgeoning IT capacity and fossil fuel shortages [that are] soon to resume, if peak oil theorists are right, foreshadows a re-localization of the economy. The term ‘mass localism’ describes an emerging state where complex challenges are addressed by people working in globally networked communities.” Peak oil theorists may well be right, but not on the timeline I imagined. Thanks to natural gas fracking, we are awash in cheap hydrocarbons once again, and the hard-won Paris Accord is at risk of unravelling.

Meanwhile, that “burgeoning IT capacity” is being used by global corporations to displace local retailers, journalists, and taxi drivers, who are about to be joined by truck drivers sidelined by self-driving vehicles. Artificial intelligence and machine learning threaten to disrupt law, accounting, medicine, banking, and other professions once thought immune to automation. “Re-localized economies,” and poorer, meaner-spirited ones at that, may well come about because of the untrammelled spread of disruptive technologies, trade wars, the building of walls, and the imposition of border taxes instead of a managed transition via inclusive growth and networked social innovation.

Frances Westley, the J.W. McConnell chair in social innovation at the University of Waterloo, has noted [\[1\]](#) that participants in a social innovation program could not find one example where achieving a UN SDG would not create “losers,” whose short-term interests would be thwarted. Any innovation can destroy people’s attachments, and if we give insufficient attention to those who pay a price when we implement new policies, we become susceptible to the false blandishments of those who would lead us backwards to “simpler times.”

In 2017 then, with an understanding that truth and technology can both be distorted to further narrow and even nefarious ends, social innovation has to become more intentional and strategic — one could say political — in the ways that it develops and shares narratives, deploys resources, and builds alliances. Further, in the era of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, social innovation shares a special responsibility with philanthropy, to respectfully engage in the patient, fundamental work of shifting cultures — beginning with decolonizing itself.

Here are three ways philanthropy can do this:

1. *Focus on inclusive growth and networked social innovation*

Inclusive growth “expands upon traditional economic growth models to include focus on the equity of health, human capital, environmental quality, social protection, and food security” (Hasmath, 2015, pp. 2-3) and is therefore a useful concept for social innovation’s support of the SDGs. It is in this context that providing a universal guaranteed basic income is again in vogue, and Canada is about to launch [another serious effort](#) to test it. The first time Canadians tested it, in Dauphin, Manitoba, from 1974-79, two groups showed lower labour force participation, as new mothers stayed home to look after their children, and teenagers in low-income households stayed in school instead of dropping out to support their families by taking low-end jobs. It seems clear that benefits accrue not only to society’s most vulnerable but to society as a whole. Over the trial period, hospital visits dropped 8.5%, as did the number of mental illness-related consultations with health professionals (Forget, 2012)

The Metcalf Foundation (2017) recently published [A Basic Income for Canadians: What would change?](#), which illustrates how nuanced a subject this is, and points out ways that stakeholders should tailor a “universal policy” to different situations.

Another promising direction lies in the networking of place-based innovation hubs, clusters, and accelerators. Whether by virtue of our immense geography or the diverse makeup of our society, Canada seems to excel at this sort of social systems innovation.

[Hacking Health](#), which originated in Montreal in 2012, convenes health professionals and technology innovators to create solutions to front-line healthcare problems in about 60 cities worldwide. It has an impressive repository of [success stories](#), and the team behind it will soon launch a complementary accelerator fund. Is it time to develop a parallel social service innovation network?

Another idea emanating from Montreal is [Art Hives](#): free access community art studios. However, that term hardly begins to describe what they do. In less than four years, Art Hives have sprung up in more than 100 places around the world. At the original location in Montreal’s St. Henri neighbourhood, I’ve met an 80-year old woman living on social assistance and exhibiting her paintings for the first time in her life; joined a Mohawk singer conducting a 30-person chorus in the adjoining community garden; and watched a recently-immigrated Egyptian woman perform a “thank you” dance to the place and the people who helped her create a costume out of recycled materials that enabled her to relaunch her career as a belly dancer.

McConnell is currently working with the Lino and Mirella Saputo Foundation on the *Maison de l’innovation sociale*/Social Innovation House concept, which will operate as a mobile social innovation incubator linking people, places, and ideas across the city of Montreal and beyond, much as the 100-strong [Impact Hub](#) movement and [UpSocial](#) are doing at a global scale.

Networked initiatives like these, including the growing number of makerspaces and community laboratories, or “[fab labs](#),” are today’s versions of the more than [2500 public libraries](#) that Andrew Carnegie funded between 1883 and 1929, or the [Women’s Institutes](#) that Abigail Hoodless founded in Ontario in 1898, and that now number more than 7000 around the world.

Such efforts illustrate the potential for networked mass localism to strengthen social inclusion and economic democracy as a counter to the deadening, destructive forces of exclusion, nationalism, resentment, and racism.

Taking a systems lens to this work is important to understanding both beneficial synergies and negative impacts. As the remarkable [elephant curve](#) depicts, while benefitting millions who have been helped out of poverty, globalization has also created a cohort of “losers” whose social aspirations were disrupted and whose resentment now fuels retrograde movements around the world.

2. Spread social innovation news we can use, and narratives of transformation

The Public Policy Forum’s recent report, [The Shattered Mirror: News, Democracy and Trust in the Digital Age](#), depicts a deepening crisis in Canadian journalism, reflecting global trends. In pointing out how the loss of “civic function journalism” puts democracy at risk, author Edward Greenspon (2017) recommends that government lift restrictions on philanthropic support for journalism. We could add that charities should be able to speak openly, hold governments to account, and advocate for policy change without arbitrary restrictions.

David Bornstein, who co-authors *The New York Times*’ [Fixes](#) column, argues that, in addition to its watchdog role in keeping politicians honest, journalism can provide an additional public service through [solutions journalism](#). Wikipedia defines this as:

“An approach to news reporting that focuses on the responses to social issues as well as the problems themselves. Solutions stories, anchored in credible evidence, explain how and why responses are working, or not working. The goal of this journalistic approach is to present people with a truer, more complete view of these issues, helping to drive more effective citizenship.”

Keeping with canine metaphors, Bornstein defines this as journalism’s bloodhound role — sniffing out and reporting on solutions. He is a co-founder of the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) (SJN), which is working with 80 news organizations to cross-pollinate discussions among communities tackling similar issues. SJN’s new [Solutions Story Tracker](#) dubs itself “a rapidly expanding searchable database of rigorous reporting about responses to social problems produced by [320](#) news outlets featuring [100](#) countries.”

To address the loss of local news coverage occasioned by the disappearance or merger of more than 160 community newspapers in 210 ridings across Canada since 2008, the *Shattered Mirror* report (Op. cit.) recommends that the national news agency, Canadian Press, create a non-profit Canadian Press Local to fill the gap in civic function journalism. What if, in doing so, it integrated networked solutions journalism capability?

3. Participate in Indigenous Reconciliation and Personal Renewal

The release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report with 94 “calls to action” marks an historic opportunity for Indigenous peoples and all Canadians to reset a broken relationship. But while the report addresses the roles of education, healthcare, the arts, business, and government, it does not mention philanthropy and social innovation. Nevertheless, we must make a sustained commitment to overcoming centuries of colonization and the effects of cultural genocide. Hence the importance of [The Philanthropic Community’s Declaration of Action](#)

, proclaimed on May 31, 2015, and the [2015](#) and [2016 Indigenous Innovation summits](#) convened by the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Moreover, this is a time when settler culture — and that includes social innovators — needs to step back to make room for, and learn from, Indigenous innovation. This includes social innovation labs ([Winnipeg Boldness](#)); impact investing funds (Raven Indigenous Impact Fund); new educational models ([Dechinta](#)); transformative social enterprises ([Aki Energy](#)); solutions to large-scale challenges like housing on reserves ([ABSCAN](#)); and restructured relationships ([Canadians for a New Partnership, 4R's](#)).

This is just the beginning, and from this beginning, there are profound lessons.

In *Lighting the Eighth Fire: The Liberation, Resurgence, and Protection of Indigenous Nations*, Mohawk writer and teacher Leanne Simpson relates an Anishinaabe prophecy. She describes the Oshkimaadziig — people of all races who come together with Indigenous Nations to enter an era when spirituality transcends materialism — when “settler society [elects] to change its ways, to decolonize its relationships with the land and Indigenous Nations, and to join [. . .] in building a sustainable future based on mutual recognition, justice, and respect” (Simpson, 2008, p. 14).

At the 2015 Indigenous Innovation Summit, Anishinaabe Elder [Dave Courchene](#) called on 300 Indigenous and non-Indigenous social innovators to see that in our emerging learning and relationships, a different future could unfold during this and coming generations. At the same event, Senator Murray Sinclair said, “Innovation isn’t always about creating new things. Innovation sometimes involves looking back at our old ways and bringing them forward to this new situation” (NAFC, 2015, p.5).

In an online essay about [Indigenous wisdom and peacemaking](#), Al Etmanski (2016) wrote, “The sacred headwaters of social innovation lie in the hearts and minds of people who have no choice but to invent their way out of pain, suffering, misfortune, devastation and hardship.” Indigenous wisdom and ceremony offer spiritual medicine and support to such people.

Everyone who struggles to advance peace and justice will almost certainly experience failure and defeat. They may discover that through ignorance or intent they have been complicit in something that causes harm. Such experiences can surface intense feelings of guilt, shame, and regret that, if not acknowledged, can feed anger and resistance to change. [The Wellbeing Project](#) is a global initiative designed to work with change leaders who have experienced such negative emotions. It helps them identify ways to transform these into processes of personal reconciliation, and renewed commitment.

Connecting and healing inner and outer this way is an Indigenous strength. In 2016, Manitoba Minister of Education and Training Ian Wishart, United Way CEO Connie Walker, and I were the honoured recipients of an Anishinaabe medicine song whose title was *Abinoonjiag* (Children’s Healing Song). As the song puts it: “The river we are paddling is the river within.”

Four paths to new roles and relationship with government

Taken on their own, inclusive growth, networked social innovation, solutions journalism, and Indigenous reconciliation constitute but a partial set of approaches to social innovation needed between now and 2030. What is missing from this picture is broad engagement between civil society and government. Before outlining four paths to addressing this, let's look at what one government is doing.

The “Saskatchewan Model”

In 2010, Dale McFee, then Police Chief of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, watched in dismay as the city's crime statistics continued to mount, along with budgets for policing and incarceration. “It was clear that we were not going to arrest our way out of our problems,” he recalled during a recent meeting we had in his Regina office.

Looking for an alternative, he came across Scotland's Hub Model, which integrates the efforts of police and community agencies — health, education, and social services — to integrate support to individuals and families with elevated risk factors that cannot be addressed by any agency on its own. Three years after adapting and introducing the model to Prince Albert in 2011, crimes against persons had dropped by 34%, and property crimes by 28%. Since then, the “Saskatchewan Model,” based on the Scottish social innovation, has spread to 13 other municipalities and regions in the province, and to another 65 across Canada and the United States.

Today, McFee is the provincial deputy minister of corrections and policing (Ministry of Justice), and is overseeing a remarkable transformation in the way government functions. Working from a hypothesis common to many governments — that as few as 1% of recipients absorb up to a third of human service budgets, and the next 5-10% another third — McFee and his team are running numerous experiments to test different ways of doing things, pinpointing focus areas, and assessing the results using data and economic analysis.

For example, he believes that we need to reverse the trend to imprison people out of a misguided sense of wanting to punish wrongdoers. “It's not like young guys going to jail have a moderating effect on the seasoned criminals they meet there. It's the reverse — so in effect we're running trade schools to create criminals,” he recounted in our conversation in Regina. “We need to employ qualified staff in facilities that focus on rehabilitation — not just the warehousing of offenders. Based on the evidence we've assembled, we've been able to repurpose a youth facility and operate it as a provincial training centre for low-risk adult offenders,” McFee added, noting that a second such conversion is to be implemented in northern Saskatchewan.

McFee believes that from a systems perspective, the public sector needs to move from mere “outputs” to an “outcomes” focus. The ability to turn volumes of data into actionable insights opens up possibilities for rethinking the delivery of social services — moving from a reactive, transactional model to one that is proactive, data-informed, and transformational.

With information sharing protocols that protect privacy, and applying systems thinking, openness to experimentation, and continuous evaluation, McFee and his team are aiming to reduce expenditures on those two groups of high users while improving outcomes. And what would it take to accelerate this work? “First,” McFee says, “we must see the current fiscal climate as an opportunity.” Then he provides two answers: “Outcomes-based budgeting; and a platform to support experimentation and learning with community-based organizations.”

Path #1 – Increase social R&D capacity

Vinod Rajasekaran has written a useful paper on social R&D, entitled [Getting to Moonshot](#). For our purposes here, it is enough to make three points.

The first is that the federal government has made an express commitment to experimentation. The Prime Minister’s mandate letter to Treasury Board President Scott Brison reads in part: “You should work with your colleagues to ensure that they are devoting a fixed percentage of program funds to experimenting with new approaches to existing problems and measuring the impact of their programs. I expect you to instill a strengthened culture of measurement, evaluation, and innovation in program and policy design and delivery.”

The second is to note that numerous federal ministries are finding it expedient to go beyond the extensive consultations they’ve held across the country to engage selected civil society organizations as partners in deeper exploration and co-creation. There is a flurry of rapid, informal social R&D activity taking place. It is not particularly well documented or coordinated, but involves dozens and possibly hundreds of organizations working with policymakers on experimental approaches to issues like affordable housing, refugee settlement, Indigenous reconciliation, cultural industries accelerators, clean energy, smart cities, and more. Since innovation flourishes at the borders of existing systems, this is a welcome development.

It would be helpful to have some simple guidelines for such work, to allow agendas to be developed and experiments to be conducted according to an established protocol. In addition, there should be some loosening of federal and provincial spending rules, so that governments can participate in such activity without lengthy waits for small amounts of funding, without relying on foundations and charities to provide it.

Path #2: Integrate philanthropic granting and impact investing in a social infrastructure bank

The OECD has observed, with respect to the SDGs, that public funds alone, and current methods of deploying them, are insufficient for transforming social systems. [2] In fields as diverse as education, healthcare, justice, Indigenous reconciliation, community infrastructure, open data, energy, and food security, the need to experiment, prototype, and invest in scaling up evidence-based innovation is restrained by current institutional arrangements.

By commingling capital from multiple sources, a social infrastructure bank could significantly increase Canada’s capacity, not just for social innovation, but for what [Grand Challenges Canada](#) calls “integrated innovation” — social, scientific, technological, and financial innovation. One instrument the bank could use is a variation on the “capital stack,” which combines different forms of capital from multiple sources to invest in a project. In a conventional capital stack, the investor who takes the most

risk stands to make the greatest rate of return. An investor who takes this position in the stack makes it possible for another who has less risk tolerance to contribute to something they might not have considered supporting. Large infrastructure projects are often funded this way.

With a capacity to both grant and make program-related investments, philanthropic foundations can achieve considerable leverage in a similar manner, by creating the conditions for private and public funders to align efforts for social impact. McConnell has used this approach in a partnership to disseminate a model of owned housing on Indigenous reserves. First, we contracted with the Aboriginal Savings Corporation of Canada to document the success of a mortgage fund it operates with the Huron-Wendat First Nation, which has successfully financed more than 400 homes for band members. Next, we tested the replicability of the model with a \$1.7 million demonstration fund that combined a grant and a zero-interest loan totalling \$500,000 from the Foundation with matched funding from Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), and a bank line of credit made on terms that reflected the Foundation and INAC's commitments. The fund provides capacity support and mortgage loans on four reserves, with promising results, and the partners are working with an investment bank and a federal agency to replicate the model at greater scale.

[Social impact bonds](#) also use private and philanthropic funds to reduce risk for government. Their use is limited in Canada but may be about to expand. The [2016 Manitoba budget](#), for example, expresses that government's intent to explore their use to improve outcomes for families. Loan guarantee funds (as McConnell and partners are currently developing with Desjardins Credit Union in Quebec); community bonds ([Centre for Social Innovation](#)); community development corporations (like [New Dawn](#) in Nova Scotia, a model that the Edmonton Community Foundation is adopting); cooperative land trusts (through the Vancity financial cooperative); and pooled granting funds (such as the Clean Economy Fund led by the Ivey Foundation) are a few of the many new ideas emerging in this space.

A social infrastructure bank could expand upon and integrate such activity with the national innovation agenda. With government spending \$300 billion annually on social services, and foundations holding \$75 billion in endowed assets, should we not be talking about what is possible when social sector creativity, civic energy — and capital — are applied to solving complex challenges?

Path #3: Create centres for useful evidence linked to social innovation labs

To advance social innovation we need to translate research findings into language we can all understand, and then openly disseminate it, as the UK Cabinet Office does with the [What Works Centres](#). Sharing evidence this way would inform policy and program innovation and make better use of public and charitable funding. It would also drive private investment and entrepreneurship.

However, it is important to not allow the “evidence tail” to wag the “social innovation dog.” Sarah Schulman's work at InWithForward demonstrates that evidence-based decision making is not a substitute for open social innovation and deep ethnographic work that challenges the assumptions, behaviours and structures of social institutions. [Kudoz](#), a social enterprise that offers a catalogue of free experiences, from volunteering in a pet store to visiting City Hall, to anyone who is bored, stuck, or just curious, was created out of compassion, deep listening, and imagination, not rigorous evidence. Eventually, both quantitative and qualitative approaches are necessary. Innovating within the constraints of existing institutions, without calling into question the rules of the institutions themselves, calls to mind the metaphor of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

MaRS Solutions Lab serves as a beacon in the social lab domain. Meanwhile, public sector labs are proliferating — there are some 22 in the federal government — and [Alberta's CoLab](#) is an outstanding example at the provincial level. When I asked its Director, Alex Ryan, what single thing he would do to extend its capacity and impact he answered: open it up to community partners. In a [useful blog post](#) describing CoLab's work he also notes:

1. Culture shifts faster through collaborative project work than through a culture change initiative.
2. The way to accelerate policy development is to engage more perspectives and more complexity.
3. The best place to put a cross-ministry design team is in a line ministry.

Path #4: Bridge sectors with learning platforms and public challenges

[Innoweave](#), an initiative with numerous private, public, and philanthropic partners, is primarily focused on bringing the tools and practices of social innovation to civil society organizations. Given the pressing need for public sector innovation, and the opportunity to accelerate social innovation through cross-sector collaboration, we are exploring the question: “What if Innoweave faced both the public sector and civil society simultaneously, with additional modules to support cross-sector collaboration?” We are in the formative stages of a potential partnership with a proposed federal initiative called Talent Cloud, which would test (at pilot scale) how government employees can work on discrete, time-limited projects across government and across sectors. If implemented, the first demonstration project would apply the talent cloud approach to developing civil society, public sector, and private sector capacity to collaboratively use data.

Another type of cross-sector collaboration is the challenge platform, of which [Grand Challenges Canada](#) is an outstanding example. It is globally recognized for incubating and scaling innovations in maternal and child health, and estimates that it will have saved between 500,000 and 1.5 million lives by 2030. Why not bring this outstanding success home, to address critical health, housing, and education needs in Indigenous communities?

McConnell has partnered with Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada and the National Association of Friendship Centres on the [Indigenous Innovation Demonstration Fund](#). In addition to awarding grants, the fund provided capacity-building support through Innoweave. Adding peer support, expert feedback, and coaching to public challenges contributes to a vibrant culture of innovation that can advance bold policy goals with the energy and ingenuity of civil society.

And the private sector? With large cash reserves, the need for social license, and an appreciation for the fact that the world's next great fortunes will be made in the solutions economy, a growing number of enlightened global corporate leaders are turning their attention to the space where sectors meet. Canadians are well represented in the senior ranks of such corporations, but there is room for improvement *within* Canada. As the CEO of a leading tech company with a strong social mission lamented during a meeting^[3] that convened civil society, public sector, and private companies working in the cultural industries sector, his company attracts wide interest from around the world but remarkably little from within Canada. However, with changes in the geopolitical landscape, we may be about to repatriate a cohort of global change leaders.

The opportunity to exponentially augment Canada's innovation capacity is within reach, and social innovation should be conferring economic advantage, while addressing significant challenges.

Concluding thoughts

In 2004, urbanist and economist Jane Jacobs published *Dark Age Ahead*, with gloomy forecasts around the erosion of community and family life; declining relevance and quality of higher education; less science and technology in the public interest; increasingly retrogressive taxation; a lack of government responsiveness to citizens' needs; and worsening self-regulation by the professions. Somehow, she missed climate change and mass migrations of people fleeing conflict.

If some aspects of our situation today appear to validate her predictions, in other respects, we are acquiring extraordinary capacity to bring about positive, adaptive change, some of which is clustered under the ideas and practices of social innovation, social entrepreneurship, impact investing and the solutions economy, and systems change.

In Canada and around the world, this work is evolving rapidly and becoming increasingly networked. We have arrived at a threshold moment, when the work must be taken to another level of impact, durability, and scale. To bring this about we have much to do within civil society, but more than this, we need to collaborate with government and the private sector in the greater public interest.

As I finished writing this reflection I was preparing to take part in a [global meeting](#) about social innovation's next decade. When I arrived at London's Heathrow Airport, the immigration agent asked me about the purpose of my visit. "To attend a conference," I answered. "And what's it about?" he asked. "The next ten years of social innovation — how to make the world a better place," I responded. "You mean if we don't end it first," he said without smiling.

I would like to thank my colleagues Tim Draimin, Darcy Riddell and Laurence Miall for their contributions to this article.

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[1] Personal communication, January 2017

[2] Development Co-operation Report: The Sustainable Development Goals as Business Opportunities; OECD (2016).

[3] The meeting was held under “Chatham House Rules” — no attribution to individuals.

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