



Co-operation and coordination

WALKING TO THE BARN in the chill morning air, you make mental note to check the woodpile. Are there enough logs to get you through the winter? It takes two to keep a fire going, more to set the hearth ablaze.

Even a fire is built on co-operation.

Neo-conservative gurus would have you believe that co-operation is a soft, woolly concept. That it is greed that drives the economy. Without greed, they say, no one would take risks. The role of government is to safeguard the greedy risk-taker from his bad decisions (bankruptcy protection) and make it easy for him to join with others (joint venture arrangements; publicly traded shares) to forage for money like pigs for truffles, offloading risk to investors.

Today, trade agreements have little to do with trade (barriers are already quite low) and all to do with allowing the pigs their truffles.

With details buried in secretive multilateral negotiations (shared with corporate partners but not with citizens), conditions are imposed and domestic laws overridden that would never pass muster in the normal legislative process.

The Trans Pacific Partnership is a good example: in addition to threatening our domestic supply management system, it will strengthen copyright

Maybe we all actually have more desire for co-operation than we do for greed



and drug patent protection (raising the cost of health care) and override domestic laws concerning the environment, workplace safety, and investment.

The expectation is that greed – the puppet master guiding the invisible hand of the market — will create jobs and investment.

But what if they're wrong? What if capitalism is yesterday's economic model? What if our true instinctive nature is not greed but co-operation? What if the interests of the community AND the individual can be mutually satisfied?

Sitting in my office on Canada's wet coast looking out on the calm, rainy waters of Howe Sound, I watch with fascination as hundreds of small water-birds repeatedly cluster together and then — as if on command, with Rockette like precision —space themselves out again in long and

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improbably straight lines. Then swim in unison, keeping the line's edge crisp, towards the shore.

Sometimes they form one line, other times two. Often the lines move forward with the birds shoulder to shoulder, like a squeegee on a window. At other times, the line moves forward in a snake-like fashion, beak-to-tail-feathers, obedient school children in strict single file.

When they re-group en masse in the shallow water, they dive a lot, harvesting the fish they have herded into their tight little circle.

How do they do it? How does it happen like that, so precisely? How can a flock of hundreds of birds share knowledge to such an intimate level that each knows exactly what to do and when to do it in such eloquent coordination? With such flawless co-operation?

And if these little birds can do it, why can't we?

For the birds, co-operation is a survival strategy: success at fishing means they get to eat. Pretty basic. We were once like that. When our forefathers/mothers settled the West, they relied on neighbours to survive, and co-operation became the building block of community.

What if we Canadians, like the little Howe Sound birds, are also born with the "co-operation gene"? What if co-operation is our birth-instinct too? Does the fact that (we believe) we no longer need to co-operate to "survive" mean our instinct and skill for co-operation has atrophied?

Have we all drunk the capitalist kool-aid and lost our way? Can we de-toxify? Because we are running out of time.

Already, profits are generated not from creating goods for use by society but through the use of financial instruments such as hedges, derivatives and futures. We have replaced

productivity with arbitrage. Capitalists have rid themselves of all the "problematic" aspects of making money – coordinating and managing labour, raw materials and bricks and mortar. All they now need are borderless financial networks, wage and regulatory disparities, currency instability and a betting mentality.

The world financial crisis provides both the impetus and the necessity to take control of our economic institutions, to find ways to reduce global disparities in income, social infrastructure and human rights. To give a decent burial to the theories of Smith, Ricardo and other 18th century economists, who lived in a very different world and whose dry and brittle bones are used by shamans of the Chicago School to conjure up the myths of globalization

("competitiveness", "jobs") to justify unfettered flows of capital.

In this United Nations 2012 International Year of Co-operatives, communities around the world are understanding that co-operative principals are not a sea anchor tying us to the past but a powerful mainsail that, well set, can stimulate the social capital of communities to build a better world.

My graduate work in the co-op masters program at Sobey School of Business, Saint Mary's University, Halifax is on why good co-ops fail. Often, the culprit is a failure of agency (governance) and a lack of financial transparency. Dairyland is my case study. I am desperately seeking 1999 and 2000 Agrifoods/Dairyland annual reports of so I can wow you with some really useful analysis. ☎

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