

Too many BAs. Too many lawyers. Not enough real work

There are too many post-secondary school students while the trades are under-served with recruits, both because they are unfashionable and because of the unions

by Conrad Black



Much of the advanced world is now creaking and groaning under the difficulty of finding useful employment or at least activity for the core of the population of traditional working age. For the first time, technological advances are increasing unemployment more than employment, and traditional business is generally less labour intensive with each innovation. The surge to service industry and other white collar occupations has been pronounced for decades. The trend was accompanied by a pandemic of socioeconomic snobbery that made it unseemly to

have what was once called a blue-collar job. As mentioned in my piece here last week about some of the vagaries of contemporary education, the percentage of people with a university degree has skyrocketed, but the utility of the degree has deteriorated. When I gained a B.A. about 50 years ago, it was a virtual guaranty of employability, though I did not use it for that, and continued at university for some years, while beginning my newspaper career.

Now, far more people graduate from university than there are jobs to be filled and, as I wrote last week, the quantity of governmental and private-sector resources dedicated to education keeps increasing, but the laws of supply and demand are not being allowed to influence the career ambitions of the young or the provision of access to occupations where young people could best gain their livelihoods. The gallant Lindsay Shepherd, heroine of the [in this space last week](#), is a graduate student in communications studies, the largest department in the university. But this isn't a real subject in the sense of being a coherent discipline where someone could emerge confident of employability, or of being launched in the study of a recognized field of scholarship like history, an important language or other distinct cultural field like art or music, direct formation for the study of a learned profession, or any of the main physical and engineering sciences.

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Companies with huge capitalizations like Facebook and even Amazon have relatively few employees, and some, like Facebook, feed a novel and faddish taste but don't actually make life much easier or more efficient, unlike Microsoft, Amazon, eBay and Uber. The drive to keep more people engaged in benign activity that isn't directly productive is causing economic society to crack at the seams at many points. There are too

many post-secondary school students while the trades are under-served with recruits, both because they are unfashionable and because the unions and associations are not, in current parlance, inclusive, and wish to retain fewer members receiving greater incomes. The governing politicians have allowed entitlements to get out of control, and with greater longevity, lower birth-rates, and ballooning pension obligations, formerly immoral activities like drinking alcohol, gambling and recreational marijuana are flourishing and rendering (now or soon) great revenue to the treasury.

The present federal government has written off the wealthy as a voting bloc and seems to be trying to move far enough left to cut the NDP off at the ankles, an admirable goal, even if the means are distasteful – the red diaper socialists in this country are numerous enough that they would accomplish more in the Liberal Party than as a third party, where they have always been ignored, other than when they were hosed out of their under-clothing by Pierre Trudeau under David Lewis and Ed Broadbent. But even this government, which is responsible, especially in league with its profligate cousins in the provincial government of Ontario, for top personal income tax levels that could not be justified in any circumstances except an extreme national emergency, seems to see that pushing rates much higher will drive wealth out, intensify the ingenuity of tax avoidance measures and raise the cost of tax collection, and someone might even understand that attracting wealth is good for economic growth, though it would be hard to credit this regime with that insight on its record.

The trades are underserved with recruits

There are far too many lawyers, because the legal profession is in charge of composing, as well as arguing and adjudicating, the laws and regulations that, in their ever-rising profusion, assure that there will always be a demand for more lawyers, more over-paid and more contemptuous of most

of their clients as each fat year succeeds another. There are too many consultants of all kinds, too many hair stylists where barbers will do, financial advisors that executives who know how to do their jobs don't need (that is, those who don't need to cite to their directors and shareholders as the justification for compensation that is too high and as the source of ideas that didn't work and were costly). In these circumstances, the pressures are not those of the free market for more skilled trades to reduce their cost to customers and employ more people who are now being expensively educated in uneconomic academic courses, creating spurious and practically redundant place men (like Lindsay Shepherd's harassers at Wilfrid Laurier). The pressures instead assure the proliferation of more and more superfluous occupations at greater and greater social cost.

If the governments in Canada applied some of the disciplines to the education monster mentioned last week in this space, and the incentives to skilled trades, and perforated union influences in overpaid areas, and required the consolidation of statutes and regulations to make legal advice more easily and less expensively attainable, permitted private medicine and redefined universality as a guaranteed basic level for everyone and reduced government benefit for those who could afford to have it reduced, a later retirement age for those who wish to continue working, and privatization of some government services, personal and corporate income taxes could be reduced, the multiplier effect of increased private spending and saving and investment would increase economic growth rates, and a benign cycle would begin.

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We see the results of these strains in the politics of almost all advanced countries. In the United States, Trump and Clinton, whatever their other limitations, managed to keep the

country between the 30-yard lines and out of the hands of the Ted Cruz far-right and the Bernie Sanders far-left. (Either would be a disaster.) And Trump is imposing some reason in policies for economic growth, better and less wasteful non-unionized schooling, and against anti-employment green mania. In the United Kingdom, there is a minority government dependent on the old Ulster Paisleyites, chaos over the Northern Irish order and in other aspects of leaving the European Union, and a leader of the opposition (Jeremy Corbyn) whose heroes are Castro and Chavez and who is an outright communist, who approves of elections as long as he wins them. His election, which the polls indicate could happen, would be the national suicide of one of the world's eminent nationalities.

In Germany, there is no longer a workable majority, and while the economy is strong, the population is aging and the chasm is widening every month between, on one side, those who wish Germany to pull on the same oar as Europe, accepting 200,000 refugees a year, banning atomic energy, and bailing out poorer EU countries; and those who want Germany to behave responsibly as Europe's greatest power and emancipate itself from the Nazi and imperialist yoke of moral inhibition, on the other. In France, where a brand new party and people govern, all is to play for. But in the election this year, the new party led the petit bourgeois nationalist right by two points; it led the Gaullists by one, and the far left, Communists and others, trailed the Gaullists by only one half point. All four candidates were within five per cent of each other. If this regime doesn't work, France could shake the world by its disunity. It has done that before.

It is less dire in Canada, but if we started tackling this universal problem of technology-generated unemployment creatively, the whole advanced world would follow. Why not lead?

Note: I apologize to [National Post](#).