

At What Price Victory?

by David B. Coll

“Whither are you rushing in such headlong flight?”

Nikolai Gogol, one of Russia’s towering literary figures, posed that question (so relevant to Alberta today) of his native land in the 1840s. The tsarist regimes that followed—arrogant, aloof, and deaf to the people’s persistent demands for democracy and basic human rights—would have done well to heed his words.

In the decades that followed, Mother Russia struggled to cope with a belated industrial revolution. Her newly liberated serfs began to flood into the cities, only to find poverty, class discrimination and bitter repression. Meanwhile, wars with the Turks over the Crimea and the Japanese over Sakhalin Island and Manchuria led to a series of humiliating defeats for the Russian army.

On a cold January day in 1905, outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, a peaceful peasants’ march to demand constitutional reforms ended in bloodshed. Gendarmes opened fire on men, women and children; some protestors, in a naive experiment with direct democracy, carried the tsar’s portrait on placards, only to be cut down in ragged rows in the snow or forced to flee, pell-mell, amid a hail of gunfire.

Unrest seethed for more than a

decade afterward, until Russians were galvanized, albeit briefly, behind their tsar, in the Great War against Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany. Ultimately, however, the war would give birth to revolution and years of internecine conflict.

The watershed moment of this turbulent time came in July of 1918, when the Russian royal family was drowned in a fusillade of Bolshevik bullets in a Siberian half-cellar. Their crumpled corpses were doused with sulphuric acid and set aflame, dumped unceremoniously down a mineshaft, disfigured by grenades tossed down the shaft, dragged back to the surface and, finally, buried in a bog. There would be no turning back.

To envision such an accursed chain of events ever unfurling itself within Alberta’s undefended borders requires a serious stretch of the imagination... So forgive me while I step atop the rostrum of Speaker’s Corner and contemplate the state of Alberta with Gogol’s question:

“Whither [Alberta] are you rushing in such headlong flight?”

“We are going forward,” we say, like an infantry battalion on a forced march. Our commanders’ weapons are statistics, in the form of key economic indicators. To the end of August, 1997 (compared to the same period in 1996), the following areas experienced high-percentage growth: dwelling starts (52.6%); building permits (43.8%); retail sales (12.7%); manu-

facturing shipments (12.5%); exports (8.9%); new business incorporations (17.3%); and incorporations by non-Alberta firms (6.1%). Employment was at a record high of 1.47 million during September, most of the work coming from the retail, manufacturing and construction sectors.

But for every number used to justify continuation of the march forward, there are numbers, too, which hint of the sacrifices to our health and well-being and that of our families, our communities, and our physical environment.

Herewith, a smattering of randomness and sobering stats: in the first six months of 1997, 6,227 Alberta consumers filed for bankruptcy, a 9.3 per cent increase over the same period in 1996 (business bankruptcies declined 29.9 per cent over the same period). Between 1985 and 1994, the real median income of Calgarians declined, from \$21,972 to \$18,824. The Calgary InterFaith Food Bank delivered 37,575 hampers in 1996, up 26 per cent from two years previous and nearly triple the 14,888 delivered in 1988. In 1993 (the most recent Statistics Canada data), 26 per cent of Calgarians 65 and over and 19 per cent of children 0–17 were living below the poverty line.

Alberta's economic victories may be significant, but so too were those under Stalin's Five-Year Plans. We have become so immersed in the cult of growth and the chimera of progress

that we are often unaware of what we are losing in the process.

Way back in 1970, a law professor at Yale University, Charles Reich, put his finger on what we are losing. In his classic book, *The Greening of America*, Reich identified a plethora of "profoundly troubling" problems at the heart of what he called the "American crisis."

Consider the following in the context of present-day Alberta:

"Our culture has been reduced to the grossly commercial; all cultural values are for sale, and those that fail to make a profit are not preserved. Our life activities have become plastic, vicarious and false to our genuine needs, activities fabricated by others and forced upon us.

"Planning is done by the exercise of private power without concern for the general good.

"Modern living has obliterated place, locality, and neighborhood, and given us the anonymous separateness of our existence. The family, the most basic social system, has been stripped to its functional essentials. Friendship has been coated over with a layer of impenetrable artificiality as men strive to live roles designed for them. Protocol, competition, hostility, and fear have replaced the warmth of the circle of affection which might sustain man against a hostile universe."

All of which reminds me of the old war saying: "At what price victory?"

So, let's ask the question once

again: "Whither [Alberta] are you rushing in headlong flight?"

Perhaps the gentlemen left alone to his thoughts in the back of the troika in Gogol's *Dead Souls* had the best answer.

"Answer! She gives no answer. The bells fill the air with their wonderful tinkling! The air is tom asunder, it thunders and is transformed into wind; everything on earth is flying past, and looking askance, other nations and states draw aside and make way for her... the road is like a cloud of smoke under you, the bridges thunder, and everything falls back and is left far behind. The spectator stops dead, struck dumb by the divine miracle: is it not a flash of lightning thrown down by heaven? What is the meaning of this terrifying motion? And what mysterious force is hidden in these horses the like of which the world has never seen?"

Gogol left it at that. I'll leave you with this first issue of *AlbertaViews*, and these lines from Psalm 103:

*The days of man are but as grass;
For he flourisheth as a flower of the
field.
For as soon as the wind goeth over it,
it is gone;
And the place thereof shall know it
no more.*

