



# ACROSS BORDERS IN A CLOSING WORLD

Alan Shepard  
President and Vice-Chancellor

Delivered as a keynote address to the  
MONTREAL COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
MAY 2017

Distinguished guests, dear friends, thanks for coming today.

I'd also like to thank the Montreal Council on Foreign Relations for providing me this opportunity.

I'm especially touched that its founder, my friend, Louis Sabourin, is here today. As you know, Mr. Sabourin led the OECD in Paris for a number of years. I'll return to Paris and the OECD shortly.

But first I will start with a contradiction that keeps growing in modern life. We've had 400 years of the scientific revolution, which began roughly at the same time as the city of Montreal was founded.

These days, the products of the scientific revolution shape all of us and make the world go faster and better.

Smart phones. Artificial Intelligence. Remote surgery. Self-driving cars. Implantable technologies. 3-D printing of human body parts. Facebook.

Mostly great, unless your teenaged children have been captured by social media.

But here's the contradiction: Up against all of this progress, we still have enormous problems. Think hunger, war, terrorism, refugee camps.

Closer to home, kids in poverty, mercury contamination, the flooding across Quebec.

Sometimes it's difficult to see how we can invent all of this scientific stuff and yet have so much misery – and such gaps between advanced and developing economies, between the well-off and the poor, the afflicted.

So much scientific precision, so little control over suffering.

And across the world, such gaps in prosperity, opportunity, safety. Even here in Montreal, as Centraide shows us.

It's at times of acute suffering or fear that a society might turn inward, raise the drawbridge, withdraw into itself.

We see this in the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit vote in the UK.

These events, as many have said, express the giant battle that is underway in western democracies. The battle is between, on the one hand, a regressive nationalism, and on the other hand, the globalism that has benefitted the West after the Second World War.

Brexit and travel bans may well slow down the exchange of goods and people, but not for long.

Isolationist trends will never spell the end of talent migration.

Nor can they stop the exchange of that ultimate commodity – transformational ideas.

We know that with change accelerating, we must gather the best information available to make ideas quickly. In such a climate, companies and countries that close ranks will quickly be left behind.

This past weekend, France rejected political extremism. But we are not out of the woods yet. There's a lot of restless anxiety everywhere. Anger, fear, and fear of the other.

Such extremism tells us that liberal democracies need to get more serious about reducing the gaps between citizens. They need to give hope to everyone.

How to do that – how to give collective hope in a liberal democracy – is really my topic today.

Institutions are important. After the horrors of two world wars, liberal democracies have created international organizations to promote the kind of enlightened cooperation that can produce social justice and peace. The OECD, the UN and NATO are among them. It's no accident that these same institutions are attacked by political leaders who want to reassert the kind of selfish, virulent nationalism that brought us wars in the first place.

But today it's not just the Marine Le Pens of the world who express a lack of confidence in the strength of our institutions—it's also ordinary people, by the millions. They're not participating in the prosperity they see around them. And the gap is widening.

So, what are some of the remedies? Communism? I don't think so. Revolution? I hope not. Even greater taxation? Some well-intentioned Robin Hood scheme? Not likely.

The remedies are complex, of course – certainly too complex for a lunchtime talk.

But they include making government more user-friendly, making regulations wiser, simpler and more transparent, so that we might trust governments more and engage more in our democratic life.

The remedies also include a shift in mentality by citizens. We could reverse the retreat from civic life that is underway now, where we inhabit smaller and smaller bubbles. We could turn off Netflix, leave our air-conditioned homes, and recommit to public life together. We could shop less, and befriend our neighbours more.

As Neil Postman once said, in the technological age, we put our collective civic life at risk when, instead of tending the public gardens of democracy, we privately amuse ourselves to death.

What's at risk in all of our distraction? Liberal democracy as we know it, under threats of extremism brought on by great social inequality.

We could recommit to our public institutions—universities, libraries, civic groups. They are all important antidotes to extremism. They give hope.

Turning to a lighter subject, next week we'll be celebrating Montreal's 375<sup>th</sup> birthday. I'm all in favour of the celebrations. Public celebrations offer a kind of remedy to the ennui and cynicism.

Here in Montreal, Canada's 100<sup>th</sup> was of course marked by Expo '67. Over 50 million people came to see it – incredible. They learned Canada was an exciting yet civil place – North American without America's social unrest. Canadian optimism was high and the future seemed wide open.

Fifty years later, Canada is still going strong. We finish high in rankings for social progress, quality of life, and international respect.

So we're well positioned to take a leadership role in this turning point in human history. To work against extremism, to defend the ideals of democracy.

We will need to take concrete actions, and not just talk. And we will need to pick up our speed, for the pace of change is shrinking the world.

Even on visits to Google and Facebook headquarters this year, where I met with senior leaders who are graduates of Concordia, our graduates expressed awe at the pace of technological change.

The energy of the technology revolution can be marshalled for good, much as Hydro-Quebec has turned running water into electricity and economic power.

To put some flesh on the bone of my remarks about liberal democracies, I will pass through three quick examples from the areas of green technology, transport, and education.

### **First, green tech.**

Today's global green tech industry has been valued at 1.35 trillion dollars. That's a big number. And it's growing fast.

Green tech provides a huge opportunity to improve our economy and our planet.

Quebec is a world model. Its electricity production capacity and know-how are essential to the development of green technologies and the green transportation revolution. Quebec is blessed with water and a favourable topography – although less favourable, obviously, in recent weeks. But in general, Quebec has made good use of its gifts.

But green technologies go well beyond hydro, wind and solar power. They include creating software to manage peak energy demand, electric vehicle development and charging, and much more. All good things for our climate, public health, and the economy.

By matching Quebec's green leadership at the national level, Canada can also become a player in the global green-tech market.

Our universities will play a big part. And Montreal is Canada's university and research capital.

My colleagues at Concordia are world leaders on several aspects of climate change.

They research how to design buildings and other structures that produce more energy than they consume.

They are also investigating how to convert forestry and agricultural by-products into green biofuel to boost Quebec's bioenergy production.

Concordia and McGill students are designing a low-cost family home for next year's Solar Decathlon in China.

And we're proud to host at Concordia the headquarters of the world's largest scientific research consortium, Future Earth, an agency of the United Nations.

But, you ask, what does all of this have to do with the defense of liberal democracy?

It's about public health.

When we heated with coal, Paris and London were choked with soot in the air. Scientists wrote treatises about it as far back as the seventeenth century.

Today, when we put progress and profit ahead of public health, we get dirty air and water.

Maybe you've breathed in that bad air in some mega-city somewhere on the planet. The smog pinches you. It makes you think that progress and profit can be bad for your lungs and your life.

It makes you think that the pursuit of economic prosperity may hurt you.

Green tech allows more progress, more trade, more life together in a way that protects the planet, that protects people, that allows us to close the gaps in income and health.

And it signals care for the planet and a commitment to the next generations.

## **Second, transport. And more generally, innovative public infrastructure and networks.**

Recently the Caisse de dépôt, and the governments of Montreal and Quebec announced a new regional train network. I love the idea.

Studies show that knowledge workers like me prefer trains. Yes, there's actually research on that.

Of course the construction of the Canadian railway changed the course of history for us, and in the twenty-first century it could happen again. Think the TGV. Think the Jinghu high-speed train from Beijing to Shanghai.

The idea for a high-speed train between New York and Montreal started with Jean Drapeau and was later revived. But negotiations on how to split funding between the various states and



provinces have always met a red light.

But a few factors have changed. Urban populations are up. So are traffic volume, gas prices, and competition for ideas and talent. Meanwhile, electricity prices continue to drop. High-speed trains promote movement, fraternité.

Or maybe we should build a Hyperloop.

The super-sonic train car in a vacuum tube is the brainchild of Elon Musk, the founder of Tesla and SpaceX.

Hyperloop is being tested in the Nevada desert. There's discussion of plans to build a Hyperloop connecting Dubai to Abu Dhabi – 140 km in 12 minutes.

But even if physical connections across North America continue to face roadblocks, our virtual links between cities and countries cannot be diminished by closing borders.

Municipal, state and provincial governments. Private industry and chambers of commerce. Entrepreneurs and universities. Together, we can foster intellectual collaborations to solve society's greatest challenges.

Those exchanges may just help those train lines get built, too.

That would be a huge step in the right direction. Democracy thrives on face-to-face contact. That's why we have parliaments.

But deep democracy craves innovation, entrepreneurial energy, the collision of competing ideas.

The best place to see that entrepreneurial energy in action is in the world's great cities.

Imagine being on the streets of New York, Boston, Montreal, Toronto, Chicago.

Together, these cities represent one of the greatest concentrations of creative brilliance since Renaissance Italy.

I'm not ready to endorse the marriage of Canada and the United States, as proposed some years ago by the business journalist Diane Francis. But high-speed trains would make it easier to work together.

Already, trade between Quebec and these neighbours is worth more than \$100 billion a year.

While it's impossible to predict how changes to NAFTA may affect us, we can say that these cities all rank among the top start-up ecosystems in the world. And that start-ups, SMEs and entrepreneurs are at the grassroots of distributed economic opportunity and, therefore, of modern liberal democracy.

When I arrived in Montreal five years ago, I was eager to see how Concordia could better engage the huge pool of entrepreneurial talent here in Quebec.

We soon opened District 3, an incubator where entrepreneurs with a new business idea can find partners, talent, tools for prototyping, experienced coaches, even seed funding.

So far, District 3 has created more than 250 jobs. It's open to Concordians – and to everyone. It's a carrefour of ideas and talent from everywhere. Following a similar model, Concordia has put down further roots in one of Montreal's creative hotbeds, Mile End, where we've partnered to create *Temps Libre*.

The vibrant co-working space allows our community and urban transformation researchers to mix organically with their community counterparts.

Over the same period, Montreal has taken steps to support its entrepreneurs. The *Quartier de l'innovation*, launched by McGill and ÉTS, has opened itself up to new private partners and universities – UQAM and Concordia.

And in partnership with the Saputo Foundation and the City of Montreal, HEC and Concordia launched the *Maison de l'innovation sociale*.

Philanthropic and public investments lead us toward a more prosperous and just world.

Public infrastructure matters. That means high-speed trains, which could bring us all together. It also means the construction of hospitals and university research facilities. It means parks, and even road repairs.

I might be the only Montrealer who is not complaining about the Turcot interchange. Why do such projects always take 10 years?



But I'm happy that we are taking care of us. Roads are networks too. They bring us across borders, and that's a good thing.

### **Third – education.**

In my twenties, I backpacked across Europe. Today's students venture to the other side of the globe, but a boy from the American Midwest thought travelling through Germany was exotic when it was still divided East from West.

On my travels, I saw many Canadians and some Quebecois. How did I know? The flags sewn onto their backpacks, of course.

Young Canadians went everywhere then, and they still do.

But, surprisingly, only about 2 or 3% of Canadian and Quebecois university students get an experience abroad as part of their education – much less than our competitor countries like Australia, Brazil and most European nations.

Universities have a duty to help students cross the boundaries of their formation and imagination, but also to enable them to experience difference and discovery.

More than five million students a year cross passport borders to get a university education. So why are so few of them from Quebec and Canada?

To create new pathways, I suggest that, with your help, we could expand international co-op programs – les stages.

By alternating work and study terms, co-op brings university and work life closer together. The hands-on experience gives students a leg up when they look for a job. And students and employers get a trial run with each other.

We help Concordia students secure work terms here in Quebec, across Canada, and on just about every continent. Many placements lead directly to jobs.

Demand is high. The supply of opportunities? Not so high. What we need from employers – that's you – are more partnerships that bring additional international opportunities for students in all our programs.

Perhaps Quebec's brilliant 1% training law could be tweaked to stimulate this investment in our workforce.

Universities have to play our part, too. Like many Canadian universities, Concordia has its share of international research and joint-degree partnerships.

But European universities are synchronized at another level entirely.

Extensive partnership networks like the Erasmus Mundus program in Europe help students complete their degree by studying in two or more European countries. It's time for Canadian universities to explore and experiment with new models too.

Of course, we have a lot to be proud of, too. As 900 year-old institutions, universities predate the Fortune 500 by centuries.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, wandering scholars crossed borders and languages to connect cultures through ideas. We still do.

But even early universities were start-ups. So, our historic institutions need to keep up with global change. Today we need to shake off our accumulated bureaucracy, to experiment.

We owe a twenty-first century education to students who are facing a brave new world, in which the social compact is being redrafted even as we speak.

And that also matters to the future of the liberal democracy we cherish.

I started my talk today with the Enlightenment – *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.

Over the last several centuries, liberal democracies have made some stunning advances in knowledge and law – advances that have greatly improved life for many people.

And yet, of course we are confronted with gaps between those advances and the continuing pain and misery of so many others.

In fixing the gaps, we should shun extremism. And cynicism. And ennui.

For sure, we should speak up when our political leaders take us down destructive paths.

We should all double-down on working together, and across borders, to build a better world.

Merci et bonne fin de journée.