Preface

The essays in this volume seek to advance a single and simple theme – that mankind has found four better ways of going about things: freedom, science-based technologies and processes, mutual accommodation, and compassion. These methods are best when they are balanced and go hand in hand. Freedom and science have been dominant in the West since the Renaissance. This emphasis has led to two results. It has brought the accumulated post-Renaissance achievements into today’s first global moment in history. It has also provoked populism and the current rise of centrifugal forces within and between countries. Mutual accommodation is urgently needed if the outcome is to be bearable and a new Dark Age avoided.

I discovered Alfred North Whitehead at a bookstore near McGill University when I was a student there in the years 1945–48. As a professor at the University of Cambridge, Whitehead had been a philosopher of mathematics and then of science. After he moved to Harvard University in 1923, he became a philosopher of everything. Recently, I have begun to wonder if two of Whitehead’s ideas are now coming together in Canada. First, civilization (Canada) is the triumph of persuasion over force. Second, quantum particles can be in more than one place at the same time. If true, that would mean

* Alfred North Whitehead, “From Force to Persuasion,” Adventures of Ideas (1933), chap. 5.
nature can be simultaneously both inflexible (what I call “either/or”) and inclusive or accommodating (what I call “both/and”). Is it possible, then, that nature at its heart may be Canadian?

These two ideas caught my attention about seventy-five years ago. Recently, I told David Cameron, the dean of arts and science at the University of Toronto, that I thought I would begin the Preface to this book (largely Globe and Mail essays, with updates) with the question, “Might nature be Canadian?” He responded, “Not the first sentence of the preface, but the title of the book.” And so it is.

Robert Wright, the American biologist who wrote Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny (1999), says: “The arrow of human history begins with the biology of human nature. That arrow ... points toward larger quantities of nonzero-sumness. As history progresses, human beings find themselves playing nonzero-sum games with more and more other human beings. Interdependence expands, and social complexity grows in scope and depth.” It sounds not unlike Canada’s path so far.

The world has changed enormously since I wrote my early Globe and Mail essays. First came Brexit, then President Donald Trump, who has been withdrawing the United States from global responsibilities while President Xi Jinping has proclaimed himself president of China for life and is fast building his boat, rail, and road links to Europe through the Middle East. In the midst of a lot of bad non-Canadian news, Canada has two strong stories – the new path forward on the Indigenous people front; and Toronto as it becomes one of the great global cities of the next fifty years.

Here is my view of where Canada stands right now. We have come for the first time in history to a moment of huge (potentially overwhelming) global transition, which began when the West moved on from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Freedom and science have overwhelmed mutual accommodation and compassion. The relative weakness of the latter two has resulted in the dangerous centrifugal imbalances that have emerged in the Western world of the early twenty-first century. The West has many key strengths, but it needs to make better use of them. It needs more mutual accommodation to do so.

A better balance of the four better ways of going about things has become urgent, if the world of the future is to be bearable. Otherwise,
the world will be dominated again by force and violence, and the achievements of civilization we have seen since the end of the Middle Ages will recede or disappear. In the intertwined world we now live in, boundaries are still needed, just as they are in families between parents and children. But the old tribal, ethnic, religious, and national boundaries are not by themselves enough to make either our identities or our physical selves safe.

Two big changes are going on in Canada within the vast transformational forces that are impacting the whole world right now. First, Canada is emerging as a different kind of great country for a different kind of world. Second, Canada has always been dependent on others – first, the United Kingdom, and then the United States. Today it remains simultaneously intertwined with the rest of the world, yet it has never been more on its own. During the last year it has found itself almost entirely alone opposite an aggressive United States, China, and Saudi Arabia. Trends of the last two decades have seen ever greater divergence between Canada and the United States. This gap will keep getting larger, unless and until the United States can make a big dramatic pivot toward more mutual accommodation and inclusiveness.

Canada has fallen short of what its economy needs for almost fourteen years, after the twenty very good years of increasing economic and financial discipline under Prime Ministers Brian Mulroney and Jean Chrétien. Neither of its two good news stories – improving the relationship with the Indigenous people and Toronto – will be easy or assured. Still, they are happening after a long sixty-year period (commencing in 1960 with the Quiet Revolution in Quebec) in which Canada successfully confronted and overcame strong existential and identity threats – threats that Europe and the United States are themselves now beginning to face and which they may or may not overcome.

If the rest of the world goes badly wrong (which it may), things will also get very hard for Canada, despite its vast array of unmatched strengths. Canada came together to confront a United States in existential political turmoil and convinced of its “manifest destiny” on the North American continent. It has often had to stand up to the United States and has always found a way to do so. Now it also has to do the same opposite an overreaching President Xi Jinping in China.
The way forward for Canada, Toronto, and Indigenous relations will take place within increasingly challenging global and domestic conditions whose outcomes are extremely uncertain. Global economic stresses intensified in the 1980s as Ronald Reagan launched the United States on an economy-wide debt spree that included not only government but the business and household sectors as well. The economic and financial overreach that started with Reagan was followed more than two decades later by the overreach of China’s global economic surge in 2005. Together, they created the worldwide global and domestic economic, financial, and political imbalances that led, first, to the post-Lehman crises and now the populism and centrifugal forces in the West – Brexit, followed by the election of Donald Trump and resurgent nationalism in Europe. Under Trump, the United States is again headed into high levels of debt, largely limited so far to the US federal government. China is now encountering the contradictory stresses of trying to live in one country and one world with two systems.

The convergence of the forces of freedom and science is leading to a moment of huge transformation similar, perhaps, to the birth of the Renaissance six centuries ago. This scale of current change creates unavoidable risks for everyone. There are, however, two counterforces to extreme bad outcomes: stronger and broader global economic underpinnings; and an intertwined world where half of the population is now middle class with a big stake in outcomes.

Canada is arguably the best place to be today, despite its current pressing challenges of competitiveness and living within its means. Canada’s net country and household-sector debt are not yet improving enough, despite recent apparently strong Canadian economic numbers (that may not be quite as lastingly strong as they look). The recent slightly lower Canadian consumption is likely the result of an expected Bank of Canada path of keeping interest rates higher than in a United States that has started to lower its interest rates, reinforced by ongoing anxiety about the future of the Canadian economy – an anxiety partly driven by Trump’s presidency.

Canada’s mutual accommodation ways are desperately needed by the world – most urgently by the United States, China, and the European Union. It would be in Canada’s own interest to play whatever international role it can. Our history with compassion
and mutual accommodation can balance the power of freedom and science/technology that have become dominant in the West and could yet destroy our civilization. To survive, it is essential that those nations normally attached to force at home and abroad discover that mutual accommodation is the better way for countries to settle their differences and live together peacefully (and competitively) on the same planet.

The immediate economic challenges may be more likely to flow not from today’s trade wars but from new financial and/or economic crises in 2020–22 and battles over technology. These crises will probably be difficult to overcome because of the current US federal debt surge and an excessive and over-long US monetary stimulus. Belatedly, the US monetary stimulus finally appeared to be on a reduction path led by the Federal Reserve (though stalled right now), but it has yet to reach positive net interest rates (after inflation). So far, it has been normalizing, not tightening, rates. The rising trade protectionism is increasingly detrimental for both the global economy and global peace. The looming struggles between China and the West/United States will be more and more over global leadership in the technologies of the future. A better-balanced global economy is needed for a bearable outcome for everyone.

The world needs the United States and China to see that the way forward is a twofold task. Their first task is to work together for a reshaped stable global economic and geopolitical order that reflects the technology, globalization, and related societal changes now underway. Their second task is to compete against each other within that order for whatever ascendancy they choose to seek. It is vital for the whole world (including for the superpowers themselves) that their rivalry take place within a fundamentally stable, fair, and balanced order. Otherwise, there will be no winners – only losers (a repeat – or even worse – of the 1914–45 era).

The West/United States retains substantial advantages over China in terms of military prowess, technology, freedom, and alliances. These advantages are weakening in the post-Trump, post-Brexit world. Their decline is due more to what each of the United States and Europe are doing to themselves than to increasing Chinese strengths. Those strengths are large and real, but they are also limited. The astute Nomura Group chief economist, Richard Koo, has recently
drawn attention to the Chinese need to avoid the middle-income trap, where the success that comes with higher incomes also brings higher costs – and those costs in turn send production to lower-cost countries. Until now, China’s rise has been on its own terms, but that has changed. China is currently in overreach, at the same moment that the Trump United States is in both overreach and underreach – partly the result of its disruptive withdrawal from its economic, financial, and geopolitical overreach of the previous twenty years. In addition to the middle-income trap confronting China, the country, because of its demographic imbalance, also faces a surplus drop in its share of global exports by 2040.

Will it be China or the United States that finally gets its reach closer to the demands of reality? Or will they get there more or less at the same time? Or will they both fail? China overdid it in 2005, with its huge global export surge. It was foreseeable that this surge, unless moderated, would affect US politics negatively for longer-term Chinese interests. During my visit to China in 2010, I predicted this outcome in both Shanghai and Beijing. I also said, at an earlier 2009 post–Lehman Brothers symposium in Toronto, that there was a real risk that the post-war inclusive global economic and financial order would not be sustainable, in part because China’s export surge was bad for both the United States and China.

In the years before President Xi Jinping and President Trump came to power, China was primarily seen by most countries in the West as a market opportunity and a low-cost supplier. Now, China is increasingly regarded as using its growing economic clout coercively and going too far in stealing Western technology. A US/China mutual accommodation – what the world most needs – looked doable before Trump and Xi, but now it seems less achievable. It is not impossible, however. The rising economic imbalances that led to the post–Lehman crises – excessive demand in the United States and insufficient demand in China, along with Germany and Japan continuing to have excessive current account surpluses – persist as the current economic expansion moves toward its end.

Both China and the United States face huge challenges in domestic economic management and in related domestic political evolution and stability. China is becoming more aggressive (and less governance
reform and rule of law oriented) on the domestic politics front, while the United States is more domestically and globally politically divisive. China has understood better than the West that it needs a social contract on which its domestic political stability rests. This contract in turn requires a stable global economic order, as well as for China to overcome the middle-income trap and minimize its demographic aging challenges. The United States already faces an identity challenge. It could also face a potential existential political challenge in its unresolved gender/patriarchy issues (pollster Michael Adams says that only 23 percent of Canadians think men should dominate the family, but 50 percent of Americans hold that belief; one hundred years ago, the percentage in both countries was 95 percent). The US patriarchy challenge could conceivably become today’s equivalent of the existential US race/slavery/Civil War challenge in the nineteenth century. China has no such existential or identity problems. It must, however, find a political way of dealing with its vastly changed post-Mao political and economic world at home. Both of the United States and China require a minimum level of global economic and political stability to address their domestic political challenges successfully. Neither has either one right now.

The recent important book by Graham Allison, a Kennedy School professor at Harvard, titled *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap* (2017), investigates the failure of the established power, Sparta, to cope with the rising power of Athens. Two huge differences between today’s world and the worlds in which Athens (in the fifth century BC) and Germany (1914–45) were new rising powers provide grounds for hope. First, the United States, despite its Trump-inflicted self-harm, is on the whole still relatively stronger than China, though that advantage cannot be guaranteed forever. It should, however, last long enough for the United States to recover the real sources of its greater strengths. Second, the world is simply too intertwined for either the United States or China to separate from it. As Quebec premier Robert Bourassa told a small group privately some thirty years ago at the height of Canada’s Quebec separatism crisis, “Even if Quebec voted to separate, it could not do so, because we are too intertwined.” Accepting the reality of “intertwined” is the path forward for both China and the United States.
Whichever one of them accepts that reality in practice will do best over both the short and the long haul.

As never before in its history, Canada will have to fit its own challenges into those much bigger ones facing the rest of the world. No country will prove big enough or strong enough to avoid doing the same to varying degrees. The idea of sovereignty free of the necessities of accommodation with others is a dangerous fantasy – the Brexit and Trump delusions. The post-1945 world that emerged from the multiple horrors of the 1914–45 era introduced new ideas, visions, and projects. They led to a much more prosperous and peaceful era. You cannot fight something with nothing. The world and Canada once again need new visions, ideas, and projects, but the time for finding them is rapidly shortening. As many countries as possible need to act decisively and quickly. Unfortunately, in human history, foresight is rarely forthcoming when it is needed. Too often, it takes ultimately unbearable horror stories to force the new ways forward – as after the 1914–45 years and after the pre-1815 Napoleonic era.

The great task of the post-2019 world is to find a less costly way forward to a better world. Great power dominance that works only for the great powers should no longer be conceivable to even the most super of superpowers. Trump disagrees. So may Xi. But it is not clear yet where the United States and China will come out. Right now, China is into the kind of overreach that brought the collapse of the Soviet Union and threatens today’s politically dysfunctional Trump America. China seems to understand that it cannot go alone and that it needs the rest of the world. But does it fully understand what it will have to do to continue the amazing economic achievements it has made since 1978? It made the right decision to choose the economy over politics forty years ago, but, as in baseball, it will need more than one pitch to keep winning. China is no exception to that rule, nor is the United States. Both countries face big choices they are not yet ready for.

The centrifugal forces now besetting the West are looking for a new direction and momentum. The news from China is that it too has the same needs. The West found a post-1945 path forward that worked, as did China after 1980. Each one is now weakening and coming up against strong counterforces. The West is withdrawing from leadership of an inclusive global order, while in China, President
Xi, speaking on the fortieth anniversary of Deng Xiaoping’s great initiative that unshackled the economy, failed to signal his support for ongoing reform. Instead, he doubled down on the importance of continuing political leadership by the Communist Party – something that has meant, under Xi, a steady retreat from the reforms that have transformed China. History has shown that separating economics from politics has never worked well for any long period of time. It is unlikely that increased Communist control of business in China will work, without more legally protected democracy and freedom. China and the United States each have to make the huge strategic decision that they will need each other for as far ahead as they can see, and then do what it takes.

My personal and professional life has been dominated by three different kinds of power: love (family); persuasion (mutual accommodation); and force (state-enforced law and strong economic players). More than seventy years as an adult has taught me that the best outcomes result from the mutual accommodation of all three forms of power. There are many forms of separateness and connectedness in the world. Each is strengthened, and all do best, when they can be mutually accommodated. The biggest personal mutual accommodation is of the self with others. Erik Erickson wrote that being adult is asserting oneself in ways that enhance the ability of others to assert themselves. Jesus told his followers to love others like oneself. The mutual accommodation of others and oneself is the biggest and most rewarding mutual accommodation of all.

My life has been blessed by my family of origin and by my wife, Molly Anne, and our children and grandchildren. We have also each been blessed by being born and living our adult lives in Canada. Our youngest son married a Chinese-Canadian young woman born to two mainland Chinese parent immigrants to New Brunswick. In her remarks at the post-wedding dinner, Molly Anne spoke: “Bill and I are both Wasps. We thought all our children would marry Wasps. Only one has. Now, our youngest child is marrying a woman from the great civilization of China. We think we are the better for it.” She got a standing ovation.
The majority of essays in this volume were published originally in the *Globe and Mail* between 2015 and 2018. In the time since they appeared, the world has changed completely – with the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, the life appointment of President Xi Jinping in China, the results of the Brexit referendum in Britain, the increasing influence in the world of President Vladimir Putin in Russia, Kim Jong-un in North Korea, and other dictatorial leaders, and the general weakening of the liberal global system of agreements and trade. So far as Canada is concerned, neither the world nor our particular neighbourhood is as good as it appeared to be in mid-2015. As we prepare for the future, it is imperative that we re-evaluate our position, stand more on our own, and make certain we look after our own politics, society, and economy. To update my original essays to mid-2019, I have added introductions to each chapter and, in addition, written several new essays on topics of current concern.