



The Pressure of Change

Change is ever with us, whether we like it or not — and people today are showing increasing signs of not liking it. In coping with change, it helps to see it in perspective. We can either resent and resist it, or anticipate it for our own good...

□ Changes, changes, changes! Will they never stop? Is there nothing constant, nothing we can count on, in this world?

To the many who are currently asking such plaintive questions, the answer is no: change is the only thing that is permanent. This law was decreed by an astute observer of the universe after years of study and consideration. His name was Heraclitus, and he lived in the 6th century B.C.

There is a tendency these days to assume that constant change is a phenomenon peculiar to modern western society. In fact, all recorded history is a story of change flowing in a never-ending stream which surges to flood proportions from time to time.

Similarly, present-day people seem to believe that the change-induced problems that surround them are unique to this era. But according to Adam Smith, writing in the 1770s, "there is always a deal of ruin in the nation." Generations in the past have been far more beset by disorder and confusion than we are now.

When it comes to change, the difference between us and our ancestors is that we know more about it, and are thus more sensitive to it. In 1805 it took six weeks for word of Nelson's victory at Trafalgar to reach Montreal. Now the news of an armed skirmish somewhere in the Middle East is flashed around the world in a matter of seconds.

Fifty years after the invention of the storage battery in 1798, only a handful of scientists had any idea of what a storage battery was. Today a

ten-year-old can tell you all about laser beams or micro-circuitry.

The news media scramble over one another to be the first to tell us what is happening, and to inform us — sometimes inaccurately and prematurely — of every new development in science and technology. The news is a record of how the world is changing, which perhaps explains why the changes we hear about are seldom changes for the better. It is a maxim of journalism that good news is no news. Good news — which means that events are unfolding as planned, with no surprises or accidents — is basically dull.

Even when the changes reported by the media are purported to be for the better, the public is apt to be sceptical. Too often politicians and experts have told us that what they propose will bring about an improvement in our lives, only to have subsequent reality prove the reverse. Too often, too, some attractive new technological venture has backfired on the society with unanticipated ill-effects.

In any case, the changes that bring about an improvement in our lives soon come to be taken for granted. If progress in medical science has eradicated diseases which once would have killed us, if the average wage-earner can now take vacations that were affordable only by rich men years ago, it is regarded as no more than normal. Beneficial change is easy to take — so easy that we barely notice it. We have difficulty, however, in accepting changes that inconvenience us in any way.

The great cosmic changes on the world political or economic scene bother us less than the niggling little changes immediately around us. We can take in stride a change in government or a crisis on the international monetary market, but a revision in a bus schedule or the imposition of a new system at work will upset us no end.

Our exasperation over these minor changes may be a manifestation of a subconscious irritation with change in general. It is the way of human nature to focus generalized resentment on a familiar person or thing.

By the same token, we may magnify changes in our daily lives into a distorted image of the changes in the great world over which we have no influence. Thus we will see the decline of western democracy in a by-law requiring us to leash our dogs. A rise in property taxes may lead us to believe that the world economic order is collapsing. The feeling that everything is falling apart begins at home.

This fear that change is plunging us headlong to ruin is fairly common nowadays. Some experts ascribe it to an overdose of change. They say that in attempting to cope with all the changes, big and small, that bear on their lives, people have cracked under the pressure. Increasing rates of family break-ups, drug and alcohol abuse, serious mental disorders and suicide are said to be among the results.

Anxiety over change has led to a condemnation of progress

At the same time, the experts add, the pressure of change is taking its toll on the physical health of at least some individuals. Dr. Hans Selye, who has demonstrated that stress leads to disease, defines stress as "essentially the rate of all the wear and tear caused by life." Change is obviously a source of wear and tear on the human psyche. It may therefore be said that change is capable of literally making people sick.

There is every sign that, in the figurative sense, people are sick of so much change. Or, as an article prepared by the World Future Society put it more felicitously, they are sick of the uncertainty engendered by changing times. "People," it said,

"no longer feel certain of anything — job, spouse, church, moral principles, whatever — because everything is changing. Hence, a pervasive uncertainty arising from change casts a pall of apprehensiveness over everything in the modern world."

Unfortunately, this anxious reaction to changing times seems to have translated itself into a blanket condemnation of change of any kind, particularly change of a scientific or technological nature. That is what is behind "the new Luddism," named after the Luddites of the early 19th century who were so fearfully hostile to change that they went around smashing labour-saving machines.

Today, demonstrations and other forms of protest erupt whenever anyone proposes a major construction or resource-extraction project. Every technological or scientific development is picked to pieces in search of deleterious side-effects. In the interests of "preserving the quality of life," posters and graffiti enlist our support to "stop" one change or another. The possibility is not admitted that by allowing the change to go forward, the quality of life might be enhanced.

This is a good thing up to a certain point. Bitter experience has taught us that we should be very careful about what we do given the delicate balance of nature and the adverse impact that certain changes may have on minority groups. But past that point, obstruction of change can become obstruction of progress. Here the words of Thomas Carlyle should be kept in mind: "Change, indeed, is painful but ever needful; and if memory has its force and worth, so also has hope."

The current distrust of development is a relatively new attitude in western society. In the mid-1800s when the Crystal Palace at the Great London Exhibition was erected as a monument to the ingenuity of the engineer, technological progress was commonly thought of as a liberating force which would open up bright new vistas for mankind. Alfred Lord Tennyson was a typical Victorian enthusiast. "Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change," he wrote in the visionary poem that predicted the airplane, *Locksley Hall*.

A generally favourable opinion of technological change prevailed through good times and bad for more than a century. And indeed — excepting its destructive role in the two world wars — technology did bring to the common people of the industrialized world a degree of material comfort, convenience, prosperity and enlightenment undreamt-of in generations past.

Assaults were launched on all the old social structures

The dropping of the atomic bomb, which transformed the nature of warfare and put the power to destroy the earth into human hands, showed that the march of science could lead only to a mass grave if it took the wrong direction. Even then, however, the public was reassured that nuclear energy would be a boon to humanity once it was put to peaceful use.

Despite ban-the-bomb movements and criticism of planned obsolescence, there prevailed throughout the late 1940s and fifties an "awe-stricken public reverence for science," as social historian Theodore Roszak described it. Most of the significant changes at the time were scientific and technological. The Cold War notwithstanding, social, political and economic conditions were fairly stable.

Then, almost exactly 20 years ago, a tidal wave of social change swept the western world, threatening to smash everything in its path. All the tried and true social structures — marriage, the family, law and order, established religion, the work ethic, the democratic political system — came under attack by disillusioned young people following leaders who were not so young.

Suddenly we were surrounded by "revolutions" — the youth revolution, the black revolution, the anti-imperialist revolution, the sexual revolution, and — in Canada — the "quiet revolution" in Quebec. Most of all there was a revolution directed against the values and presumptions of the "technocratic society." A youth leader explained: "The young — those born after 1940 — find themselves in a society that neither commands nor deserves respect... For has modern man, in his collective existence, laid claim to any god or ideal but the god

of possession and enjoyment and the limitless satisfaction of material needs?"

The dissenters of the sixties and early seventies were searching for something beyond material satisfaction, and they searched for it down some very strange avenues. Every code of behaviour that had been in force up to that time was smashed to pieces, or so it seemed. Faced with the drug cult, flower power, sit-ins, love-ins, campus revolts, and the burning of city blocks, the chief reaction of the older generation was one of pained bewilderment. It was as if the world had turned upside-down; white had become black, right had become wrong, and two and two didn't make four any more. The unthinkable was thought, the unspeakable was spoken, the unacceptable was accepted. The outrageous was practised as a matter of course.

People will turn their minds back to a less troublesome time

In addition to this staggering social and political change there was an ongoing advance in science and technology — especially in computers — which spelled the end of many of the old methods of doing things. It was this pile-up of change that led Alvin Toffler to conclude that the society, or a sizeable proportion thereof, was in the grip of "future shock." His book of that title published in 1970 sold 6 million copies in 20 languages. In it he defined future shock as "the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time."

Victims of future shock, wrote Toffler, attempt to hide away from change in different ways. They may "block out" unwelcome reality and refuse to take in new information; they may look for a simple solution of all the world's ills in a single doctrine; they may withdraw into a cocoon of specialization; or they may turn their minds back to an earlier and less troublesome time, and try to apply the solutions of the past to the problems of today.

This last course, he implies, is the most self-defeating of all, not only because old solutions won't work, but because they will only compound the agony of adjusting to any entirely new phase of history. For, he declared, "We are creating a new society. Not an extended, larger-than-life version

of our present society. But a new society. Unless we understand this, we shall destroy ourselves in trying to cope with tomorrow."

With these apocalyptic words, Toffler challenged the traditional wisdom about change, which is more or less summed up in the old saying that "history repeats itself." He served notice that there could be no looking back for the guidance and comfort of precedents. By the time he was ready to publish *The Third Wave* in 1980, he was convinced that we have entered into not only a new society, but a whole new civilization — one that "blind men everywhere are trying to suppress."

The changes of the past 20 years are by no means unparalleled

Have we really come that far? At the risk of appearing reactionary, it is worth pointing out that the deep and rapid change of the past 20 years is by no means unparalleled. The two decades leading up to World War I, for instance, brought a surge of change which was more fundamental and far-reaching than anything we have experienced in our time.

Automobiles, airplanes, phonographs, movies, wireless communication and synthetic fabrics were only some of the things that emerged then which were to exert a profound influence on human habits. X-rays and blood transfusions revolutionized medicine. Freud pioneered psychiatry, Einstein framed his theory of relativity, and Rutherford discovered the structure of the atom. A stunning burst of creativity occurred in all the arts, and a bold new look emerged in design and architecture. Explorers reached both of the earth's poles.

It was also an age of tremendous social and political upheaval. Anarchism, militant feminism, anti-clericalism, bohemianism, "free love" and outlandish fads scandalized those who had drawn their values from the Victorian era. International financial crises, limited wars, revolutions, strikes, riots and political assassinations sent shudders through the newly-literate general public, which

was exposed for the first time to mass media in the form of cheap and ubiquitous daily newspapers linked by cable to all parts of the world.

The so-called "*belle époque*" ended in the holocaust of "the war to end all wars" — a phrase which in itself illustrates how misguided people can be when they read decisive historical significance into current circumstances. The point is that there is sufficient historical evidence that change moves in cycles to justify scepticism towards declarations that the world is changing for good and all. As for future shock, while it may indeed be a common condition these days, it does no harm to remember that "the human mind has always struggled like a frightened bird to escape the chaos which caged it." Henry Adams wrote that some 80 years ago.

Must unforeseen changes necessarily be unforeseen?

But whether Toffler is right or wrong that a new civilization is rising from the dust of the industrial age, he is certainly right when he says that both individuals and the society should be better-prepared for change than they have been up to the present. We are constantly jolted by unforeseen changes. Must they necessarily be unforeseen?

In our personal lives we must recognize that while change is inevitable (we ourselves change physically and psychologically, after all), it is also to some extent predictable. We can ease the pressure on ourselves by assessing the probability of various changes and trying to be ready for them if and when they come.

The best hope for society lies along the same lines, in the systematic study of future probabilities and the development of contingency strategies in advance to deal with them. Change itself has provided the tools for this in the form of new technology, techniques, and academic skills. "By making imaginative use of change to channel change, we can not only spare ourselves the trauma of future shock, we can reach out and humanize future tomorrows," wrote Toffler. We now have it in our power to anticipate change, or to resist it. Which shall we choose?