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The University of British Columbia MAGAZINE

FIGHTING DISINFORMATION

THE WIDENING WEALTH GAP

HOW POLARIZED ARE WE REALLY?



WILL DEMOCRACY ENDURE?

A PUBLICATION OF
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Editor's Note



DEMOCRACY UNDER FIRE

Who but the most cynical or self-serving would argue against a system of governance that gives people a voice and protects their rights – one that values freedom, equality, and justice? For all our divisions, isn't democracy still the best option for enabling us fractious humans to live together in peace? As has often been noted, democracy in practice may be far from perfect, but it's a lot better than the alternatives.

And yet, in what seems like an act of self-cannibalization, some established democracies – most alarmingly the US – are voting in autocratic leaders who are challenging the underpinnings of the system that brought them to power: an independent judiciary, a free press, fair and transparent elections, checks and balances on unfettered control. And where autocrats haven't gained power they are often gaining traction, with traditional conservative parties increasingly being rendered irrelevant by hard-right movements that used to operate only on the fringes.

Multiple factors lie behind today's political currents. There are the sophisticated online campaigns of disinformation – digital coups, of sorts, that have corralled people into different versions of reality and left countries in political gridlock. There is rapid cultural change and social upheaval. There are the failures of democracies to deliver on their promises, with ever-more-conspicuous inequality. Too many have been left behind and left out, leading substantial swaths of populations susceptible to false narratives that inflame their anger and misdirect it.

Although democratic backsliding has been observed around the globe for many years, it wasn't until the rise of Donald Trump, and especially the early months of his second term, that a widespread sense of democracy in peril took hold. The world watches as he unabashedly takes a sledgehammer to the pillars of democracy and to longstanding military and trade alliances that anchor the current word order. There is a fear that this administration will normalize authoritarianism, and that civil rights and the rule of law might be too easily pushed aside, providing a free pass for others in the same mold to follow suit.

That said, the recklessness, arrogance, and incompetence that have characterized this rapid change may have precisely the opposite effect. The backlash is already evident. It can be seen in the results of the recent Canadian and Australian elections, in sustained protests, in plunging approval ratings, and in resistance from courts, universities, and trade competitors.

Although his base remains ardent, the effect of Trump's first few months back in office has been a coalescence of the rest – a majority who do not want to live in undemocratic and illiberal countries and are united by this priority. This moment may yet prove to be a turning point: a chance not just to defend and protect democracy, but to renew it for the 21st century.

VANESSA CLARKE
Editor



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The Future of Democracy

Political observers have noted an ongoing global decline in democracy over the past two decades. And now, the world’s most powerful nation is led by a president who is openly challenging the democratic ideals on which it was built. What are the roots of this backsliding, and how can democracy be strengthened for the 21st century?

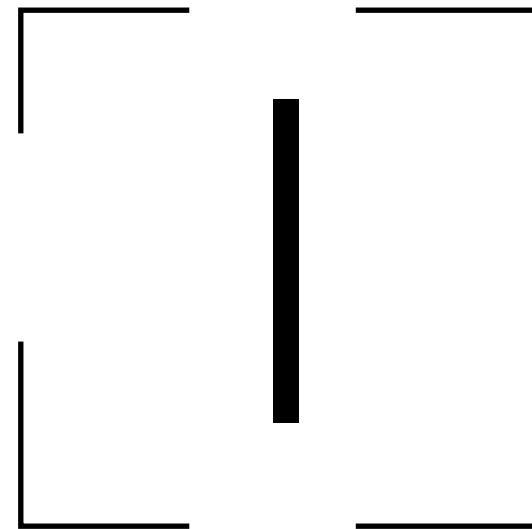
Cover Illustration: *Nathalie Lees*

This page: Demonstrators in Chicago staged a protest this April to raise awareness about the growing threat to democracy posed by the Trump administration.
(Photo by Jacek Boczarowski/Anadolu via Getty Images)

Down, but not out

Democracy is on the decline.
For now.

BY RICHARD LITTLEMORE



IN TIMES OF stress – and these are stressful times – it’s a privilege to be able to check in with an expert to confirm whether your anxiety is even valid. So it’s good to be sitting across the table from Lisa Sundstrom, a UBC professor of political science who has been researching democracy and its challenges around the world for decades. Here is someone who will understand the worst, and know the best. But it’s bad when her opening comment on the state of that apparently fragile form of governance is: “I find myself banging my head on my desk.”

Sundstrom isn’t just responding to the latest unnerving headlines. Rather, she points out that the US-based Freedom House, which tracks the state of democracy

around the world, opened its last annual report by saying that in 2023, “Flawed elections and armed conflict contributed to the 18th year of democratic decline.”

Mark Warren, a UBC professor emeritus and the immediate past president of the American Political Science Association (APSA), is similarly trepidatious. He adds that, as far back as 2016, the Economist Intelligence Unit had demoted America itself to the status of a “flawed democracy.” And that was before Donald Trump resumed the presidency and immediately pardoned the many hundreds of mob members who had violently challenged the legitimate results of the previous election.

Sundstrom, however, won’t let the conversation rest on a negative. Much as the current state of democracy has a worst-ever feel to it, she notes that in 1973, when Freedom House published its first assessment of global political rights and civil liberties, it found only 44 of 148 countries to be “free,” whereas the count has climbed to 84 free countries out of 195 on the modern list. Freedom House declares: “The primary finding from 50 years of Freedom in the World analysis is that the demand for freedom is universal, and not even the most sophisticated and brutal crackdowns have succeeded in extinguishing it.”

It’s important, in setting the context for this discussion, to register the case that democracy is, objectively, a good thing. As Warren says, the research is clear: “Strong democracies tend to be healthier, happier, more innovative, wealthier, less violent, less corrupt, more pluralistic and tolerant, better for women and minorities, and more attentive to the worst off.”

Sundstrom, too, has long embraced the case for democracy, having built her whole career on what now appears to have been a high watermark in democratic achievement. The daughter of a high school history teacher in Ucluelet, BC, Sundstrom landed at the University of Victoria in 1989 – the year that the emboldened citizens of Germany pulled down the Berlin Wall, marking a ceremonial end to the Cold War between the democratic forces of the West and the repressive regime of the shattered Soviet Union. Buoyed by the spirit of *Perestroika* – of restructuring – Sundstrom decided to major in political science, started studying Russian, and in her third year moved to Moscow.

“It was very exciting,” she says. “Nothing worked, and there was nothing in the stores, but the people were wonderful – very poor but very hopeful.”

The whole world seemed hopeful, Sundstrom says. “After the Cold War, democracy had so much momentum – the influence of those ideas.” People everywhere seemed to agree that “to become a player on the world stage, you did it by joining the club of democracy.”

Sundstrom moved on to Stanford University for a PhD, but she continued to focus on Russia, writing her dissertation on civil society and the rights of Russian soldiers and women. So she watched with personal concern and professional curiosity as the country struggled with its nascent democratic status. “It’s not that Russia was ever successfully a fully fledged democracy, but I was still hopeful.”

Then came the rule of Vladimir Putin, who emerged as acting president on the last day of 1999 and has, in one guise or another, ruled Russia ever since. It was during his first decade in power, Sundstrom says, that “elections became performative” – to the point that, in the last decade, no independent monitor would call a Russian election fair.

The democratic backsliding was also spreading. Just as Putin initially won over the Russian people by saying, “The West cheated us and stole our wealth; don’t rock the boat, and I’ll make things better,” Sundstrom says that Hugo Chávez eked out his early and legitimate electoral victories in Venezuela in 1998 by declaring that the system was broken and that he and his movement alone could fix it by destroying the nation’s internal enemies – a line that echoes with disturbing familiarity today. As the new century unfolded, other examples of democratic degradation followed, including in Poland, Italy, and particularly Hungary.

Warren addressed this notion in a keynote address to the APSA last September, saying that, while a few African democracies have been overthrown violently in the past decade (Zimbabwe in 2017, Sudan and Mali in 2021, Chad in 2022), “Today, resurgent authoritarianism is rarely the result of military coups, but rather the work of political elites who have won elections [or made significant gains], from Trump and [Hungary’s President Viktor] Orbán to Poland’s Law and Justice, the Alternative for Germany, and France’s National Rally.”

It appears, then, that, for at least some of the people some of the time, “electoral institutions are failing to reflect the democratic values of citizens, and in some cases actively undermining them.” Examining that systemic failure, Warren identifies five “structural causes of discontent” within developed democracies. They are:

Globalization – which can separate workers from the wealth they create and voters from the people who make decisions that affect their lives;

Economic inequality – which undermines the majority’s faith that the electoral system is fairly representing their interests;

Cultural polarization – which is driving a wedge between younger, more racially and ethnically diverse majorities in dynamic urban areas and older conservative voters often concentrated in rural areas. The latter are more vulnerable to what political scientists call status insecurity and have been



**LISA
SUNDSTROM**

Professor of political science specializing in Russia and the former Soviet Union; AVP, Research & Innovation (beginning July).

▼
**RESEARCH
FOCUS**

Her research career has focused on democratization and authoritarianism, human rights, gender politics, climate politics, and civil society activism in both Russian and transnational politics.

▼
SIDE SERVINGS

After growing up in Ucluelet on Vancouver Island, she lived in Moscow for the first time during the third year of her undergraduate degree and became hooked on trying to understand Russian politics and society.

convinced to lash back against the imperatives of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which they believe are being used to undermine not just their privileges but their rights. Warren notes that, “Other writers have postulated that the 2016 election of Trump was, at least in part, a backlash to rapid and progressive cultural change, represented politically by the election of Obama in 2008 and re-election in 2012;”

Social media (now AI enhanced) – which is unedited, largely ungoverned, and therefore fertile ground for both domestic political entrepreneurs and foreign mischief-makers who organize, spread rumors and misinformation, and manipulate voters; and **Polarization** – in which people live increasingly in what political scientists call “epistemic bubbles” – echo chambers of algorithmically curated input that is more likely to reinforce people’s biases than broaden their horizons. Warren says, “We should worry about polarization because it signals that adversaries are becoming enemies, and enemies are less likely to deal with conflict peacefully.... Democracy, of course, fails if it cannot channel conflict away from violence and into talking and voting.”

Sundstrom offers a sixth factor undermining democracy – something circumstantial rather than structural, but powerful nevertheless: COVID. With everyone locked in their homes, reduced to doom-scrolling on their cellphones, “everything was more inflammatory,” she says. “People were afraid and resentful of government. There was a disengagement from collective solutions.”

School of Journalism professor Peter Klein also weighs in, saying that, in addition to the rise in social media, we are suffering from a decline in traditional media. He names in particular the major US television networks NBC, ABC, CBS, and PBS, which, like CBC and CTV, were virtual public squares where the whole population was once exposed to a common set of facts. Warren agrees, noting that even before the algorithm-generated bubbles on social media, informational self-selection was breaking out with cable television, “the first post-war medium to segment audiences.”

When we stop listening to one another, it reduces the chances that we will speak with understanding or even respect.



“Dictatorships tend to look very strong, until suddenly they’re not,” says UBC’s Lisa Sundstrom. December 2024 saw the collapse of the 61-year Baathist regime in Syria and the end of the Assad family era. Statues of Hafez al-Assad, the father of Bashar al-Assad, were demolished in various cities across the country. (Photo by Emin Sansar/Anadolu via Getty Images)



A cover with the photo of overthrown Syrian president Bashar al-Assad lies on the ground in a former al-Assad military base in Sweida, Syria. (Photo by Elke Scholiers/Getty Images)



HISTORY LESSONS

Disinformation is nothing new. Here's how to fight it,
according to a historian of media.

BY MADELEINE DE TRENQUALYE, BA'07 | ILLUSTRATION BY IBRAHIM RAYINTAKATH

FOLLOWING THE ARAB Spring uprisings of the early 2010s, there was a flood of optimism about social media's potential to unleash democracy around the world. "If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet," said activist and Google executive Wael Ghonim after Egypt's Mubarak regime was toppled. Many believed that Facebook, Twitter, and other digital platforms would amplify marginalized voices and hold the powerful accountable.

At that time, historian Heidi Tworek was wrapping up her PhD at Harvard, looking at how Nazis used radio – a revolutionary technology at the time – to spread horrific propaganda around the world. "Everyone was talking about this utopian vision for how new technologies were going to spread democracy and uplift communities, and I was basically looking at the exact opposite thing – how a group of people used a new technology to really nefarious ends," says Tworek. "I thought, OK, here's a moment where a historian needs to intervene to say, 'This is not new. Every media technology has been used for political purposes, but it's a mistake to assume it can only be used for utopian ends.'"

While she was adapting her research into a book about Germany's efforts to control global communications from 1900 to 1945, she witnessed history repeating itself in disturbing ways: "The far-right revived Nazi terminology using *Lügenpresse* (lying press) to decry the media. Marginalized groups were targeted online and blamed for societal ills. News was falsified for political and economic purposes," she says. "And like radio in the first half of the 20th century, a technology designed for utopian aims became a tool for dictators and demagogues."

Today, the narrative around social media and democracy has flipped into a dystopian vision. Social media is now blamed for fueling disinformation, division, and violence around the world, algorithmically funnelling audiences into disparate partisan echo chambers, and eroding a shared sense of reality on everything from health, to climate, to politics. A 2024 World Economic Forum report named misinformation and disinformation the top global risks for the next two years, outranking war, climate disasters, and health epidemics. In early 2025, the head of Canada's Foreign Interference Commission warned, "Information manipulation (whether foreign or not) poses the single biggest risk to our democracy. It is an existential threat."



HEIDI TWOREK
Canada Research Chair and professor of international history and public policy; director of UBC's Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions.

RESEARCH FOCUS

The history and policy of communications, particularly the impact of new media technologies on democracy.

WRITING

Her acclaimed book, *News from Germany: The Competition to Control World Communications, 1900-1945*, was published by Harvard University Press in 2019, and her writing has appeared in major magazines and newspapers.

SIDE SERVINGS

She reads and/or speaks nine languages, including German and Polish.

Sparked by this sustained and overwhelming global concern, Tworek – who joined UBC in 2015 and now directs its Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions (CSDI) – has become a key voice in shaping policy responses. She has testified before governments around the world on platform governance, hate speech, and election integrity in the digital age. During the height of the pandemic, she advised officials on combating health misinformation. More recently, she co-authored a report on protecting elections in the age of Generative AI, and served as an expert witness for Canada's Foreign Interference Commission.

Here are some of her key strategies for tackling disinformation:

UNDERSTAND HISTORICAL PATTERNS

As a historian and policy expert, Tworek has worked to shed light on what is unprecedented about today's disinformation crisis, and what is simply a newer manifestation of longstanding problems. She notes that some aspects of disinformation in the digital age are truly unprecedented: the scale of the Internet's reach, the granular level of surveillance, the micro-targeting, the global pre-eminence of US-based platforms. But disinformation itself is an age-old problem, and Tworek cautions against viewing new media technologies through a strictly utopian or dystopian lens. Fake news has existed since the advent of newspapers, and new technologies like the printing press, the radio, the Internet, or GenAI have all been used to amplify misinformation – at least in the short term.

Disinformation often has an economic incentive, but Tworek says it has long been a tool of geopolitics as well. "Countries historically turn to information warfare as a cheap form of interference when they feel geopolitically weak," she explains. "That was as true for Germany in the past as it is for Russia today."

The more important questions for Tworek are: What structural conditions enable disinformation? Why does it spread more at certain times than others? How do entire information ecosystems, not just individual pieces of disinformation, shape democracy?

FOCUS ON BUSINESS MODELS, NOT CONTENT

Rather than trying to crack down on problematic content – which many governments have tried and largely failed to do – Tworek

argues that we need to investigate the economic structures that enable disinformation to thrive. "It's tempting to focus on examples of individual content that are particularly harmful," she says. "But the reason those pieces of content go viral is because of the few companies that control the bottleneck of information."

In the early 20th century, British and French news agencies dominated global news distribution – which is why Germany worked so hard to develop its own strategies for influencing global communications, as Tworek detailed in her book. "Today you still have a small number of platforms who frame and shape how we communicate with each other," says Tworek. And those platforms profit from engagement, regardless of whether content is true or false.

Tworek says the potential for manipulation has increased since Elon Musk took over Twitter (now X), and Meta abandoned its fact-checking program. "We've seen how political influence can shape these platforms," she says. "We need only think of Trump's inauguration, where the CEOs of major tech companies were seated in front of his own cabinet." She calls the concentration of economic and political power in today's tech world "historic and alarming."

At a minimum, Tworek says we need far more transparency about how algorithms work. She points to the European Union's Digital Services Act – which requires tech companies to provide more transparency and imposes stricter rules on targeted ads – as a model that Canada should consider. She has also considered whether Canada might join Europe as a negotiating partner in its efforts to safeguard democracy from digital manipulation. "Canada is a small market that cannot hope to sway big tech companies on its own. Working with Europe is one way for Canada to create change."

STRENGTHEN THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Tworek has also urged policy-makers to move beyond just policing bad content and pay more attention to making trustworthy information more accessible. "If we just focus on disinformation, we miss the bigger problem: the health of the entire information ecosystem." Investing in public and independent journalism, supporting digital literacy programs, and improving government communications can help. She points to a study from the early days of COVID that analyzed government health websites around the world and found most were written at a university reading level. "There is no country on earth where 100 per cent of people have a university education. And thus that is an exclusionary way of providing this information." Governments need to think about the basics: "Are you translating it into all the right languages? Is it easily accessible? Are you putting information on all the social media channels that reach Canadians, including ones who may be searching for information in Mandarin or Cantonese or Hindi?"

A generation ago, government officials could get away with just holding a press conference and feel confident

their message would reach the public through mainstream media. Today, governments need to work a lot harder to get accurate and accessible information in front of their citizens, she says. If they don't, bad content will bubble up to fill the void – whether it's misinformation shared by genuinely confused people, or disinformation paid for by problematic actors.

DEMOCRACY-PROOF SOLUTIONS

Although the state has an important role to play in fostering a high-quality information landscape and protecting citizens from disinformation, Tworek cautions against overreaching regulatory measures. As her research on Weimar Germany shows, well-intentioned efforts to curb disinformation can ironically enable problematic control of content by less democratic governments in the future. The Weimar government's attempts to protect democracy by increasing state supervision over content ultimately laid the groundwork for the Nazi propaganda machine. Tworek recommends a two-part test to any new policies. First, how could an authoritarian regime misuse this policy for censorship? Second, how would tech companies evade or manipulate it?

Tworek notes that the role of disinformation isn't always to push a specific agenda; sometimes, it simply aims to create confusion or erode trust. This is one reason why she and her colleagues warn against sensationalizing the problem, even in the face of insidious AI tactics such as deepfakes. As her colleague at CSDI, Chris Tenove, puts it: "If people believe there is widespread disinformation or use of deepfakes, they are more likely to believe the entire information system, including news media, is untrustworthy – or maybe even that democratic institutions and election outcomes themselves are untrustworthy. It's good for people to be critical and skeptical, but not to feel disempowered or cynical. People can and do find accurate information. Elections can be conducted with integrity. We need to be vigilant in addressing some of the risks that generative AI poses, but not fatalistic."

Finally, Tworek argues that we need to understand misinformation and disinformation more as symptoms than root causes. Focusing solely on information manipulation distracts from the real-world issues that leave citizens feeling alienated, powerless, and distrustful of their institutions. "Social media may amplify anger, but that anger also stems from real-world experiences of current conditions," Tworek writes. "If we do not address pressing issues like growing inequality and climate change, improved social media communication will not stem discontent."

Q

COLLECTIVE WISDOM

One pressing question. Multiple expert perspectives.

How should democracies adapt for the 21st century?



Find the middle ground

BRADLEY MILLER
Associate Professor of History

We're living in a time of heightened political tension, where the appeal of radical, burn-it-all-down solutions has gained ground globally. In this moment, governments and civil society must safeguard their legitimacy and empower political centrists to roll their eyes at calls for upheaval – not at the institutions themselves. That means moving carefully, being genuinely inclusive, and backing off issues where broad consensus doesn't exist, however worthy the causes may seem.

For Canada, this means embracing fiscal pragmatism. Canadians want investments in infrastructure, defence, and health – but they also see a government that's grown bloated and ineffectual. They want leaders willing to ask what government can stop doing. Many are also worried about lagging private-sector productivity and feel institutions like the CBC and our universities have grown too doctrinaire and preachy. A conservative should be able to watch a CBC documentary or take a humanities class without feeling like they've entered a parallel universe – and a progressive arts graduate should be able to envision a desirable future for themselves in a successful business. If democracy is to thrive, its institutions must feel like they belong to all of us.



Recommit to collective agency

CHRIS TENOVE, BA'99, MJ'01, PHD'15
Research Associate, School of Public Policy and Global Affairs

Several factors are driving democratic backsliding, including deeply felt insecurity, a politics of grievance, and dysfunctional information systems. Under these conditions, citizens may defer their collective agency to authoritarian or technocratic leaders. Instead, we should recommit to collective agency and support it with appropriate infrastructure.

Democracies pursue practical solutions for all affected by problems, like economic or environmental insecurity, rather than ignoring or demonizing others facing similar predicaments. We need big wins to demonstrate the value of democratic collective agency – such as a major green energy expansion that lowers energy bills, or a cross-generational improvement in housing accessibility. These require government leadership and mass participation by civil society and industry.

Our information system exacerbates divisions and undermines collective action. Social media and artificial intelligence should be regulated to prevent harms, but we also need investment in digital participation infrastructure that supports collective agency.

Big wins and a transformed communication infrastructure are whole-of-society projects, and they can only work if we recommit to a vision of democracy as truly collective action.

Illustrations: Aaron McConomy, Colagene, Creative Clinic



Accept responsibility for refugees

HELENA ZEWERI
Assistant Professor of Anthropology

Democracies must confront their role in producing the crisis of mass human displacement we see today. Military occupations, political meddling, and projects of economic extraction have been major drivers in the displacement of more than 122 million people – the highest figure since the end of World War II.

According to Brown University's Costs of War Project, the Global War on Terror in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines has resulted in the external displacement of 38 million people. And the mass exodus from Central America and Haiti in recent decades has been catalyzed by prolonged political interference by current and former imperial powers that mobilize private entities and humanitarian organizations to do their bidding.

And yet liberal democracies are constantly developing new strategies to keep the displaced out – from deterrence to deportation to detention. Liberal democracies that are signatories to the UN Refugee Convention need to treat the provision of refuge not only as a standalone commitment but also as a responsibility they have toward those whose lives they have damaged.



Take control of the narrative

KAMAL AL-SOLAYLEE
Professor and Director, School of Journalism, Writing, and Media

At the risk of sounding reactionary, democracies around the world have *some* lessons to learn from the authoritarian factions trying to destabilize or destroy them. Democratic nations and institutions must understand the gravity of, and forcefully respond to, the fact that we are living in an age of information wars and duelling narratives.

Democracies cannot take their existence for granted and cling on to the belief that citizens will choose them by default. Proponents of democracy must stop being reactive to the barrage of fake news and disinformation that the other side has become so powerful at creating and disseminating. Democracy needs a different and better story in the 21st century – one that connects its ideals to the economic and social aspirations of the people it serves. Until democratic nations learn to take control of the narrative wheel and pivot from reactive to proactive, they will continue to cede ground to their enemies. Democracy dies in darkness, but the glaring light of disinformation can be just as fatal.

FOR MORE RESPONSES, SEE:
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Luxury yachts in Monaco. (Photographer: Jeremy Snyker/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

Why the rich are getting richer

And how a widening wealth gap is damaging democracy.

BY CHRIS CANNON

DOES A RISING tide really lift all boats?

Well, technically, yes. Which is great if you happen to live on a boat.

The phrase made sense when John F. Kennedy famously said it in 1962. The richest Americans paid a tax rate of 91 per cent, and top CEOs were paid 21 times as much as the average labourer. The success of the few buoyed the necessities of the many.

Today, America's highest tax rate tops out at 37 per cent, and the CEO-to-worker wage gap has ballooned to 290-1. Canada has fared little better, currently taxing the top earners at 33 per cent and sporting a wage gap of 210-1. So while the rising tide might have lifted all yachts, if you are part of the growing demographic that barely earns a living wage, you might know what it feels like to tread water.

"The story of the last few decades has not been one, for the most part, of rising poverty," says Alan Jacobs, head of the Department of Political Science at UBC. "Rather, it's been a story of rising concentrations of income and wealth at the very top. It is the very rich who have been pulling away from everybody else, essentially, in terms of their share of resources."

Indeed, poverty rates in the US and Canada have remained steady or fallen slightly since 2000. But over the same period, the income gap between working stiff and executive suit has grown dramatically – an outsized disparity that not only polarizes the economic landscape, but also the democratic structures we rely on.

"Economic inequality is itself a creature of politics, but it also feeds back into politics and into the functioning of democracy," says Jacobs. "One way in which it can do that is by diminishing citizens' trust in government and their sense of belonging to the social collective. There is quite a bit of evidence that rising inequality is associated with declining trust in government, and declining satisfaction with democracy. It gives those who are on the losing end the sense that democracy just isn't really working for them."

THE GROWING DIVIDE

Part of the economic gap arises not from differences in nominal salaries but in wage-adjacent extras like massive

bonuses and stock options that skirt the tax code and drain the coffers. Once based on job performance, formerly routine perks for executives have become eye-popping packages, such as the \$47 billion in stock that Tesla shareholders awarded to Elon Musk in 2024 – more than half the company's total income that year.

"It seems like something's broken down in that chain of accountability from shareholders to boards, such that boards tend to be rubber stamping ever-larger pay packages that often are not closely tied to performance," says Jacobs. "So there have been ways to pay senior executives more and more, made easier by lax oversight by both boards and governments."

On the other end of the scale, lower- and middle-class jobs have taken hits from automation, offshoring jobs, and declining union membership. The federal minimum wage in the US – once a benchmark of fair pay for low-skilled workers – has not risen since 2007. Nearly 80 million US workers work hourly jobs, many of them more than one.

"We see a hollowing out of the occupational categories that would have generated decent and, over time, rising incomes in the middle," adds Jacobs. "But the overall compensation that lower- and middle-income workers receive is the outcome of a struggle between the owners of capital and labour. In any company, there's a certain amount of revenue to be distributed. Some of that is going to go to pay the workers, and some of it's going to be returned to the owners. Unions, traditionally, were a really important source of leverage and bargaining power for workers. And so, if unions are collapsing, that gives capital a much stronger hand and makes it much easier for them to hold wages and salaries down."

The rise of income inequality feeds the cycle of wealth inequality; outsized compensation packages for executives provide the capital for the accumulation of assets – stocks, property, company ownership, inheritance – that generate more wealth without more labour. The gap widens considerably because wealth generates more wealth, while those at the bottom struggle just to make it through the week.

VOTING FOR CHANGE

But we are talking about democracies. Those who have too little vastly outnumber those who have too much, so why don't we see citizens voting for people who offer more equitable redistribution – higher taxes on the very rich and forms of government spending that would improve the material welfare of everyone else? Why do so many people vote against their economic interests?

“Across Western democracies, we see lower- and middle-income voters behaving in exactly the opposite way that you might expect at election time,” says Jacobs. “We might expect to see governments that have overseen rising inequality get punished by the lower- and middle-income voters who are losing out. Instead, they vote at higher rates for governing parties that oversee periods of rising inequality. We expect people at the ballot box to be thinking about their own economic interests to some degree, but it doesn't appear that most voters are very good at doing that.”

The problem, then, is one of information. How do voters know whether the economy is serving their interests? How is economic performance being defined for them? What counts as a good economy or a bad economy for the individual voter?

Jacobs and his colleagues have tackled these questions by looking at the influence that news media play in shaping citizens' economic perceptions. Analyzing more than a million articles about the economy from the largest circulation US newspapers, they tracked over time whether the news media were reporting good economic news or bad economic news, and overlaid that with what was actually happening for different income groups – the very poor, the middle class, and the very rich.

“What we found is that the tone of the economic news – that positivity or negativity – is highly correlated with the fortunes of the very rich – whether they are having a good year or a good quarter,” says Jacobs. “There's very little connection to the economic gains and losses being experienced by everyone below the 95th percentile.”

In other words, voters cast their ballots based on a judgment shaped by a news media that's telling them the government did a great job on the economy when the rich have been doing better than everyone else, and that the government has mishandled the economy when the poor are closing the gap.

Essentially, journalists aren't considering questions of distribution – instead treating the economy as an aggregate whole that's either booming or falling into recession. They're not thinking about who is getting what.

“Functioning democracy requires a well-informed citizenry,” says Jacobs. “If the news media are not providing the basic information citizens need to figure out a question like ‘is this policy going to be good or bad for me,’ then citizens are not going to be able to play the role that democracy or democratic theory assigns to them.”

What follows is a domino effect: skewed economic reporting begets citizens voting against their interests, which empowers leaders to enact policies that favour the wealthy, thus widening the wealth gap and disenfranchising voters who are losing ground and struggling more every day.

“That can lead to not just distrust,” says Jacobs, “but a sense of inefficacy – to citizens wondering ‘Why should I bother taking part in politics if my voice, my preferences, my interests just don't count?’ And that leads to a reduced sense of investment in community, which is going to lead to disengagement and probably dissatisfaction with the political system – with democracy. Citizens need to be informed about which policies are contributing to rising inequality or contributing to the stagnation of incomes, and they need to be drawing a line from those policies to the decision makers, because it's only with that information that citizens are equipped to hold governments accountable.”

Three Questions for Thomas Lemieux

Dr. Lemieux is a professor at the Vancouver School of Economics at UBC and director of the Stone Centre on Wealth and Income Inequality. The centre was established last year to support research on the causes and consequences of wealth and income inequality, and possible remedies.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “WEALTH GAP” AND “INCOME GAP”?

The key difference is that income is what we're earning every year – and there's some inequality there – but wealth is everything we've accumulated and inherited, our net worth. Wealth inequality is much more pronounced than income inequality. For most people at the bottom of the distribution, like minimum wage workers, their income is barely enough to keep them afloat. They're not able to save, so they're not going to have any wealth. Middle-class income is mostly going to housing and pensions. Then you get into the top 10 per cent – the people who own companies and have lots of stocks.

WHAT EFFECT DO UNIONS HAVE ON WAGE EQUALITY?

Companies are fighting against unionizing workers, and the legal context has been such that they're able to do so. Over time, the connection between unionization rates and income inequality has become very clear, and workers' power has been declining. One of the biggest concerns about this growing wealth inequality – and you see it on full display, right now, especially in the US – is that some of the wealthiest people are very anti-union and anti-worker, and they have infinitely more power than a regular citizen.

HOW IMPORTANT IS TAXATION IN KEEPING THE WEALTH GAP FROM GETTING OUT OF CONTROL?

People who have higher earnings pay substantially more taxes than workers who have lower earnings. But when you get into wealth, there's all kinds of ways people avoid paying taxes. I would say that taxation – in terms of keeping wealth inequality at bay over time – becomes really essential. And the fact that taxes have been going down, especially in the US – both taxation at the very top and taxation of estates – is contributing to the growth of wealth inequality.

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THE “STRONGMEN” WHO ARE BREAKING DEMOCRACIES

Autocratic leaders are more likely to score highly on dark personality traits and perform poorly. Why do people vote them into office?

BY JARED DOWNING | ILLUSTRATION BY KLAWE RZECZY

ONE MIGHT THINK the rise of modern democracy would have pushed “strongman” leaders – autocratic bullies like Emperor Nero, Genghis Khan, and Adolf Hitler – to the fringes of global politics.

But leaders with autocratic tendencies have become more prevalent over the past decade, and many are being voted in by democracies – including Hungary, Turkey, Slovakia, and (perhaps most alarmingly) the US.

Their style of governance attacks the very foundations of democracy: They undermine or flaunt the rule of law, bully and threaten critics and media, and tamper with free elections. So why are people, even in long-established democracies, electing such undemocratic leaders?

Part of the answer could have its roots in our deepest – and darkest – psychology.

Many strongman leaders aren’t just undemocratic, they exhibit “dark personalities,” a term psychologists use to describe psychopathy, narcissism, sadism, and/or Machiavellian manipulateness – the “Dark Tetrad” of personality traits.

“These personality traits exist not just in the extreme criminal context, but really permeate our everyday lives,” says Leanne ten Brinke (PhD’12), associate professor of psychology at UBC’s Okanagan campus.

Dr. ten Brinke began her career studying the behaviour of convicted criminals, but during a post-doc at the University of California Berkeley’s Haas School of Business, she became interested in the dark personalities that walk among us, from tyrannical dictators, to cutthroat CEOs, to cheating spouses.

As director of UBC’s Truth and Trust Lab, ten Brinke and her colleagues explore the minds of these dark personalities – and also why people are so ready to trust them, even revere them.

Dark Tetrad traits usually appear together – people who score highly on one often have high scores on all four – and they are more common than you might think: Roughly 20 per cent of us have noticeably dark traits, and while only around one in a hundred people is a psychopath by clinical standards, at some point most of us will encounter someone – a co-worker, perhaps a date – with elevated levels of these personality characteristics.

Dark personalities are also more likely to strive for high positions, and often obtain them through lies, manipulation, and intimidation.

“The dark traits tend to be associated with interest in power,” ten Brinke explains. “They tend to perceive interactions as very dog-eat-dog competitive. They generally



**LEANNE
TEN BRINKE**
Associate professor of psychology who directs the Truth and Trust Lab on UBC’s Okanagan campus.

RESEARCH
FOCUS

Deception; lie detection; non-verbal behaviour; psychopathy; power and influence.

She focuses on how we make judgments of other people, and her work reveals an unsettling paradox: despite how crucial it is to identify trustworthy people, we’re surprisingly poor judges of honesty and character.

PUBLIC
OUTREACH

Her upcoming book, *Poisonous People* (March 2026), provides advice on how to mitigate the negative influence of dark personalities.

don’t see a world in which there’s win-win, because they’re quite interested in dominating other people.”

It comes as no surprise, then, that the hallmarks of dark personalities tend to be the same hallmarks of strongman leaders.

Take the current American president. Nobody can diagnose Donald Trump with a personality disorder from media coverage, but we can observe his behaviour: He appears to act impulsively, which is one of the clinical symptoms of psychopathy. He also lies freely and apparently without remorse (“manipulateness”). He’s ready to mock and insult anyone and everyone (“callosness”). He tosses aside rules and etiquette (“persistent antisocial behaviour”). And while he may never conquer Canada, he probably thinks he can (“grandiose sense of self-worth”).

Some people interpret this behaviour as a welcome upending of the status quo, or as well-calculated misdirection meant to wrong-foot his opponents. But others see it as something darker.

“I hesitate to make a definitive statement, but if you think about what makes up psychopathy, his behaviour would suggest that he’s high in many of these traits,” says ten Brinke.

Regardless of whether prominent strongman leaders like Trump, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, or Vladimir Putin have true dark personalities or are merely employing similar tactics, their dominance-based leadership styles tend to be less effective than respect and empathy-based approaches associated with a more democratic leadership style.

One study that ten Brinke co-authored examined hedge fund managers who show psychopathic tendencies – the real-life Patrick Batemans of *American Psycho* – and found that these people actually make for lousy investors.

“Psychopathic leaders can be charming and persuasive, but poor performers who mismanage, bully, and engage in unethical behaviour,” the study concluded.

Another study analyzed the careers of US senators who exhibited dark traits. These lawmakers, though possessing superficial charm, were often less able to find co-sponsors for bills and influence their peers.

Historically, strongman leaders have been associated with fear and bloodshed – and they tend to be lousy for an economy.

A study published last year in the *European Journal of Political Economy* found that throughout the world, countries run by dictators tend to have far weaker economies

than more democratic ones (although those dictators often falsify their economic data).

So why do people keep getting duped by dark personalities? Why do we fall for narcissistic lovers, award promotions to pathological liars, and elect full-blown psychopaths to government offices?

One answer is that humans are naturally trusting. Most of us try not to tell lies or knowingly stomp on people's feelings, and we usually expect the same from others.

"We're sitting ducks," ten Brinke explains. "There's actually an evolutionary theory that the proportion of dark personalities who use this kind of manipulative approach to get what they want stays at relatively low levels in the population because they are exploiting that trust that most of us have."

Furthermore, sometimes people actually want psychopaths to be in charge.

"When people are uncertain and a little scared, if there's economic uncertainty or military conflict, and we feel like we need a strong person



Where one voter sees impulsivity, ruthlessness, and deceit, others might see decisiveness, strength, and cunning.

to stand up for us, those kinds of conditions can increase the likelihood that you get support for that person who adopts a dominant approach to leadership, as opposed to a more respect-based approach."

Where one voter sees impulsivity, ruthlessness, and deceit, others might see decisiveness, strength, and cunning.

Furthermore, ten Brinke says dark traits are not confined to any particular political party. Republican or Democrat, Liberal or Conservative – anyone can lie, manipulate, and strong-arm their way to the top.

Unfortunately, there isn't really a "cure" for dark personality traits, especially in adults. Darth Vader and Ebenezer Scrooge may have had changes of heart, but in the real world it is extremely difficult to alter someone's fundamental nature – especially for dark personalities, who often fail to see their personality as a problem at all.

"They don't learn from punishment in the same way that the rest of us do, particularly those high in psychopathic personality traits. It might feel morally righteous for us to punish a person with a dark

personality who has done something wrong, but it's not likely to change their behaviour."

A more effective approach is to meet them on their own terms.

"What seems to work better is rewarding them for good things they do. That's the basis of treatment for youth with callous, unemotional traits: really focusing on rewarding them for engaging in pro-social behaviour while also trying to discourage the anti-social stuff."

As for avoiding strongman leaders in office: vote your party, vote your conscience, but try not to vote for a psychopath.

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HOW POLARIZED ARE WE REALLY?

Even the most hostile political adversaries
may have more in common than they think.

BY BRUCE GRIERSON | ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATHALIE LEES



THIS IS WHERE the culture wars have landed us: two tribes, ideological opponents glaring at each other across the figurative aisle, interminably separate and boiling with rage. This, many are concluding, is no way to live. And it's a dangerous way to organize ourselves politically – for at the end of this road lies chaos, autocracy, or both. But there may be a silver lining in the story of our polarization, as the work of UBC researchers reveals.

It was not a foregone conclusion that it would come to this. Five years ago, in a much-cited paper, UBC psychologist Kristin Laurin and her graduate student Gordon Heltzel (MA'19, PhD'24) proposed that there were two ways the US political landscape could change: it could become more polarized, or less. More because polarization is a self-reinforcing cycle, or less because extreme polarization makes us unhappy – social creatures that we are – and we're inclined to self-correct. We now know fate favoured Door Number One. (That's due to a number of factors, including the impact of COVID and a second round of Trump.)

And so here we sit, each in our silo, drawing a heavy red line between People Like Us and People Like Y'All. South of the border, folks are literally moving out of state to be away from their ideological foes and with their own kind. Which is a huge red flag, for there's ample proof that extreme polarization undermines democracy.

And yet, in a way, the news is not as bad as it seems. The sense that progressives and conservatives are “two solitudes” with irreconcilably different ways of thinking is a bit of an illusion. In short, we're not as polarized as we think we are.

In a recent study, Laurin compared the qualities that people said they liked in their allies with the qualities they rewarded online by liking or sharing content. The two didn't add up. People claimed to prefer a nuanced, generous communicational mode, but their online behaviour suggested it was the guns-a-blazing, we're-the-good-guys-and-you-bastards-are-out-to-lunch tweets of the hardliners that got the love.

Somehow, a disconnect happens between our mind and our retweet finger. The question is why.

“I used to think people are just lying when they say they respect moderation, and we should believe their actions and not their words,” says Laurin. “But I've come

to a different understanding. I don't think it's the same people whose words are contradicting their actions. I think most people's actual values are invisible under these powerful social forces” – in this case the small minority of extremely opinionated people who shape the norms on social media. And then those damn enmity algorithms whip up the polarization even further.

Social media is a reality-distortion machine. “We buy into these crazy stereotypes about what our opponents actually believe,” Laurin says. “I have a colleague who studies what people's own beliefs are and then compares them to their opponents' beliefs. And there is so much overlap. But we perceive each other to be these cartoonish exaggerations.”

All this is good to know. Because understanding what's clouding our judgment might set us on track to behave in ways that are more aligned with who we are, rather than who we think we're supposed to be.



Over in UBC's political science department, Dr. Maxwell Cameron (BA'84) investigates polarization in a different context. One of his passions is preparing people for public life by training them to achieve common goals “within a framework that is highly adversarial” – the parliamentary system.

Maxwell co-founded the university's Institute for Future Legislators (IFL), a program in which aspiring politicians role-played the cut-and-thrust of actual parliamentary debate. In its way, the parliamentary system is every bit as polarizing as the Internet. It amplifies the differences between out-group and in-group.

“Two things promote partisanship in politics,” Cameron says. “One is elections, which are competitive – you join a team and immediately you become partisan. And then there's just the environment of the legislature. You're sitting on opposite sides of the aisle – two sword-lengths apart. You get angry at the other side; you want to prevent them from getting in your way and doing things.”

Humans are tribal by nature – blame our evolutionary wiring. The moment we join a group, “team spirit kicks in very quickly,” Cameron says, and we start thinking in terms of Us and Them.

Cameron observed this in IFL time and time again. “One year, shortly after people were randomly assigned to parties, one of the participants fell ill. We had to call an ambulance and they took him to Emergency.

He ended up being fine. For a while, though, everyone was concerned. But the only people who called or visited him in the hospital were the members of his own political party! They felt a duty to him that people in the other political parties just didn't feel, even though the parties had just been formed.”

If our behaviours are super-malleable – and they are – the good news is it can work both ways. Just as we learn bellicose partisanship, we can learn the opposite: to mitigate the expression of our primal instincts, the better to arrive at a place where constructive engagement can happen.

This is the secret sauce of the role-playing element of Cameron's IFL. Experiential simulation is powerful. It's especially useful for acquiring practical skills. The whole enterprise of conducting “the people's business” is one for which folks are woefully untrained. “The most consequential decisions in a society are made by amateurs,” Cameron says. “By which I mean, most politicians had very little experience before they ran for office. The practice of politics, unlike political science, is rarely taught.” To learn any skill – to turn theory into practice – you've got to get your reps in – hence the IFL's weekend boot camps, followed by a parliamentary simulation held in the chambers of the provincial legislature.

But just modelling a toxic system isn't helpful. Cameron found that if students simply aped the adversarial Westminster model of parliament – with its incentives to blind party loyalty and weak co-operation across party lines – you got a garbage-in-garbage-out effect: they never progressed beyond the incentives to unhealthy polarization.

That's why a debrief layer is so important.

“Here we borrowed the model from the UBC medical school, where students transitioning from classroom curricula to clinical practice learn ‘reflective competencies’ through group discussions. What we call ‘reflective circles’ enhance students' acquisition of practical skills from one another and from mentors.”

That post-game reflection helped the participants shake off any inclination to extreme polarization. “They gained detachment from their parties, even as their appreciation grew for the complex balancing acts that partisan politicians must continuously perform,” Cameron says.

There's a “walk a mile in my shoes” element to this kind of role-playing. It's hard to remain enemies with people you have truly made an effort to see and hear.

In the social sciences, there's a phrase that captures how to shrink the distance between two people who are at loggerheads – emotionally and maybe even ideologically: “Contact weakens polarity.” Actually sitting down and talking with someone who you thought was your enemy invariably makes you come away feeling less judgmental. Many interventions have proven useful in this respect – from deep listening, to curiosity, to cultivating intellectual humility by making understanding your primary aim.

“Anything that gets you to acknowledge the other side's humanity really can work,” Laurin says. But there's some evidence that the most powerful element of all is hearing someone's story. In one recent study, people become less extreme in their views if they'd heard a personal narrative from the other person. That remained true even six months later. “It was like, ‘Now that I've seen you in the flesh, or otherwise imagined your circumstances, I grow softer toward you,’” says Laurin. “I still may not entirely agree with you, but I can see where you're coming from.” Cameron agrees.

“There's no question in my mind that when people encounter each other, face to face, one on one, we have a remarkable capacity to

resolve our differences, and we discover we have more in common than we think we do.”

Here, though, is an important detail to remember: it's possible to reduce partisanship too much. There's an optimal level of partisanship in any system, and it's not zero. A healthy political ecosystem needs viewpoint diversity. It needs the productive friction of opposing opinions, and that applies to everything from a marriage to a parliament. A lot of the same rules apply. Compromise solutions that end up with both parties marooned, dissatisfied, in the mushy middle, are suboptimal. Plus, most people, just to maintain their own integrity, have lines they're not willing to cross. As Laurin puts it, “There are some ideas we don't want to get closer to.”

“In politics, some degree of partisanship is a good thing. You can't have a democracy without it,” says Cameron. (Indeed, too little distance between parties is often a sign of collusion/corruption – that the governing party is in some way “paying off” the opposition to toe the line.) “If you're not partisan enough, you're not going to get elected – and even if you do, you won't be successful in parliament because you won't have the discipline to sacrifice your own interests and take one for the team. On the other hand, if you're too partisan, you can't listen to the other side, and you can't negotiate effectively with others; you become a flame-thrower, as we say. That's unhelpful and it can turn off voters.”

These days the danger is clearly too much partisanship, not too little. The perils of over-partisanship spring into relief in times of instability – like when a country faces a sudden external threat. A divided home side has no hope against a more powerful aggressor.

“I think we're seeing that in this moment right now,” Cameron says. “There's an extraordinary coming together of our country today. People are saying, ‘We need to be strong, we need to express our pride in our country and defend it and not allow it to be taken away from us.’ And suddenly all the polarization seems out of place. I think that what Trump has done has served as a lesson for how we move forward: we rally around what unites us.”

THE BORDERS OF BELONGING

Dismantling birthright citizenship risks turning democracy into a gated community, say UBC experts, and deepening inequality for generations to come.

BY CHRIS CANNON | ILLUSTRATION BY KLAWE RZECZY

THE TERM IS *jus soli* – “right of the soil.” Commonly known as birthright citizenship, it is essentially a licence to inhabit whatever random spot in the world the universe sees fit to drop you and call it home.

Historically, the concept of a nation was defined by its predominant ethnicity, and citizenship largely determined by one’s family bloodline: *jus sanguinis*, or “right of blood.” But over the past century, as modern transportation has brought every border within reach and our growing capacity for international conflict has displaced people by the millions, emigration from one’s home country has become more common, and most nations have come to embrace a combination of dirt and blood in defining who can call their lands home soil.

In the US, the roots of birthright citizenship run old and deep, enshrined in the Constitution’s 14th Amendment, passed shortly after the American Civil War to ensure equal protection for formerly enslaved peoples. Canada similarly prides itself on the inalienable right of citizenship for those born to its shores, but the legal ground is shakier than most Canadians realize – protected by law, but subject to the whims of the party in power.

Although widespread in the Americas, broadly inclusive birthright citizenship is rare in Asia and Africa, and has recently been pared back in Australia and across Europe. The notion that a person has a right to live where they are born is a simple idea that has become warped by the realities of globalization, and increasingly subject to conditions such as parents’ legal status. As immigration surges and national identities grow more fractured and diverse, birthright citizenship is seen by some not as a guarantee of equality, but as a loophole to be closed. For others, it remains an integral pillar of democracy.

“It’s extremely important that countries of immigration like Canada and the United States have birthright citizenship based on territory because it is a way of levelling the playing field in each generation,” says Irene Bloemraad, professor in the departments of Sociology and Political Science and co-director of the UBC Centre for Migration Studies. “Especially for immigration countries where there’s such diversity in our immigrants in terms of religion, background, language, skin colour, etc., it provides one basis of equality, given all of the ‘othering’ that can happen. It’s an incredibly equalizing law and ethos.”

“US” AND “THEM”

It is the “othering” that dominates the conversation around birthright citizenship today. Immigrants looking for a better life have become a right-wing boogeyman, particularly in the US, reshaping the concept of birthright citizenship from a shield to a cudgel. Terms like “anchor babies” and “birth tourism” have turned a unifying principle into a divisive one: yes, you are a citizen, but you do not belong.

“Territorial birthright citizenship is absolutely in peril, globally speaking,” says Amanda Cheong (BA’12), assistant professor in the UBC Department of Sociology and author of the forthcoming book, *Omitted Lives*, on exclusions

from civil registration and citizenship. “Canada and the USA are among just over 30 countries today that grant unrestricted *jus soli*, and since 2000, countries like New Zealand, Ireland, and most recently the Dominican Republic, have abandoned unrestricted *jus soli*. This is a concern because Canada and the USA have been facing similar anti-immigrant political pressures to follow suit.”

With colleagues at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, Cheong is currently working under a major grant funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to debunk the stereotypes surrounding birth tourism in Canada, where opponents of birthright citizenship are stoking a panic to justify adding more barriers to becoming a Canadian.

“What we’re finding in our research is that these political narratives are not only inaccurate, but harmful to immigrants and racialized minorities in our society,” says Cheong. “This is dangerous because political arguments that birth tourism is on the rise – or that birth tourism is posing a substantial threat to the sanctity of the institution of birthright citizenship in Canada – is based on either no data, or flawed, imprecise, and incomplete data and estimation methods, which are fundamentally incapable of identifying migrants’ actual motivations for migrating to Canada and giving birth on Canadian soil.”

Weaponizing the very concept of birthright citizenship to create an imaginary underclass of natural-born citizens can have a chilling effect on a democracy. Both American and Canadian histories are littered with race-based attacks on the institution of belonging: Canada’s Chinese head tax of 1885; the internment of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans during WWII; the horrors suffered by Indigenous peoples who had much to fear from registering their children with the government; the long struggle for Black Americans to fully realize their voting rights promised by the 15th Amendment, but blocked by a century of deterrence from state laws, poll taxes, literacy tests, and violent intimidation.

“Territorial birthright citizenship is a major legal foundation on which our multicultural Canadian nation is built,” adds Cheong, “and it is urgently important that we defend against attempts to do away with it if we want to remain an inclusive, pluralist Canada in the future.”

FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

One would hope that countries with strong democratic foundations would have the strength to withstand challenges to the most basic principles of citizenship. But the 2014 Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act – which raised alarms about how easily political priorities could chip away at birthright protections – and current efforts by the US administration to undermine the 14th Amendment, threaten the very underpinnings of a just society.

One of the principle tactics employed by anti-democratic forces is control over documentation – birth certificates, social insurance numbers, voter cards, passports – that

allow people to move freely about their country and participate in its democratic processes. According to UNICEF, more than 50 million children under the age of five – nearly a quarter of the global population – have not had their births recorded by their governments, which can severely limit their access to fundamentals like education, immunizations, health care, and voter registration.

“Birth certificates are a basic human right, because they are the documents that we need to obtain all of the other forms of official identification that make daily life possible,” says Cheong. “Most importantly, birth certificates are often the material building blocks that people need to secure citizenship. Statistical omissions – people who fall through the administrative cracks – are not necessarily accidents. Governments can strategically deprive unwanted minorities of rights and recognition by depriving them of the documents needed to establish that they exist as legal persons.”

Omissions from civil registers and other state systems are bureaucratic strategies that can be used below the formal letter of the law to prevent people from securing their citizenship, even if they are legally entitled to it. As hard as it might be for Canadians and Americans to believe such strategies could take hold in their countries, the truth is we are already on a slippery slope. In April, the US government declared more than 6,000 legal immigrants dead so they could cancel their social security numbers and force them to “self-deport,” robbing them of any chance to gain citizenship in the future, and de facto exiling their American-born children.

The United States hasn’t passed a comprehensive immigration bill since 1990, leaving states and cities to create a mishmash of policies in how they deal with documenting identities so they can award (or deny) public services based on increasingly draconian interpretations of eligibility. Although US citizenship is a national status and passports are issued by the federal State Department, birth certificates are issued by states, and each US state can further delegate that birth registration to counties or municipalities. As the American obsession with voter ID laws shows us, it’s a short road from questioning the absolute right of birthplace citizenship to determining that being a citizen at birth isn’t enough, and there should be other considerations to be seen as a real American.

“Citizens are dependent on those birth certificates,” says Bloemraad. “So Texas might decide to have different-coloured birth certificates for the people who *can* prove that at least one of their parents was a US citizen and the people who *can’t*. But California will refuse to do it. Vermont might refuse to do it. Massachusetts will refuse to do it.

“And then the State Department is going to have to do something. So if you wanted a passport, the federal government could say we’re only going to accept Texas birth certificates, not ones from California. And people in California who want their passport are going to scream because they’re US citizens. So it can get really messy, really fast.”

Despite anti-democratic forces deeply embedded in the current administration, the US court system is unlikely to allow a wide deviation from the norm when it comes to protecting birthright citizenship. In addition to decades of case law supporting the integrity of the 14th Amendment, alienating a large segment of its own population would create a massive underclass of native-born children without citizenship because their parents were undocumented or temporary immigrants. Undocumented status would become genetic, passed down to children and grandchildren, no matter how many generations before you were born on American land.

Canadians are often surprised to find out that birthright citizenship is not protected in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; it exists only in legislation. Since the country’s inception in 1867, millions of people born on Canadian soil lost their right to live in Canada for a host of reasons, ranging from misogynist policies to simply not being in the country on their 21st birthday. Over the past 40 years, largely due to citizenship crusader Don Chapman and his Lost Canadians movement, the government has enacted a patchwork of fixes to correct the loopholes in the system. But without a constitutionally enshrined birthright promise, that system remains vulnerable to influence by those who want to narrow the definition of “Canadian” to suit their purpose.

POWER TO (SOME OF) THE PEOPLE!

Perhaps surprisingly, a well-functioning democracy and a generous immigration policy don’t go hand in hand. The bulk of academic research suggests that allowing the general populace to have a say in issues of immigration and citizenship makes it more restrictive. The democratic impulse is not to be generous and hand out citizenship to all comers. Immigrants are welcome, but they aren’t us.

“There’s an analogy here to welfare chauvinism,” says Bloemraad. “Europeans, for instance, are very much in favour of a generous welfare state. They want to equalize the playing field. But they don’t want the ‘others’ to get it. So some people – some immigrants – don’t even get to be on the field. The same is true for citizenship and democracy. Those who won the citizenship lottery at birth automatically enjoy political rights through no effort of their own. They get to determine who else is allowed the full rights and promise of citizenship equality. But the non-citizens don’t get a say.”

This is the fundamental tension with birthright citizenship: it is both inclusive and exclusive. If you were born in the club, you are in the club – but some of the snootier members keep asking to check your ID. Citizenship, then, is not just a legal status but a cultural battleground – a symbol of who counts, and who decides who counts. As nations face growing migration and identity anxieties, how we define citizenship will determine whether democracy remains a shared ideal or retreats behind locked gates.

SOMETHING FOR EVERY TYPE OF CURIOUS TRAVELLER



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Photo: Margo Yacheshyn / UBC Okanagan University Relations

UBC Okanagan street signs in the Nsyilxcn language are a visible recognition of the Syilx (Okanagan) Nation. The font used for the signs, Whitney Salishan, is the result of a collaboration between UBC and the Musqueam and Syilx peoples, on whose territories the university's campuses are located.

CHANGE/ MAKERS



**Garry McCracken,
MSC'21**

<<

Retired military engineer; Life-long learner

<<

Next challenge:
A 2,500km fundraising bike ride from Vancouver to Winnipeg to honour our military and support the mental health of veterans and first responders.

Photo: Darren Hull

THE ROAD TO VALOUR

An army veteran who survived mental illness is helping to support others whose professions expose them to trauma.

BY ROSEMARY ANDERSON,
BA'74, MFA'19

FOR GARRY MCCRACKEN, joining the military was more an expectation than a choice; serving our country was simply what McCracken men did. But there had also been a terrible cost. McCracken's paternal grandfather, a multi-decorated WWI hero, returned from war suffering from shell shock, a form of PTSD that was poorly understood and had no known treatment. The after effects of his unhealed trauma – passed down through the generations – led to lifelong mental health issues for his descendants, including Garry.

During his own time in the military, McCracken could never divulge his inner struggles. "If I'd mentioned having a mental disorder, the only treatment I would've gotten was a boot to the butt and out the door." While the army has now changed for the better, the peer pressure still says to keep silent. "It's the machismo," McCracken explains, "and it's not just the military; it's first responders, too. There's too many that are suffering, too many suicides, too much bravado."

Just as in the army, our first responders must present a strong, calm exterior no matter what horrors and dangers they may face. No wonder so many of them develop stress-related mental disorders. Yet, even now, there are scant resources available to support these heroes and help them heal.

Some years ago, McCracken narrowly survived his own suicide attempt. Fortunately, with help from a close friend plus his own determination and resourcefulness, he regained his zest for life. "To treat my head, I used the dopamine, endorphins, adrenaline, and everything else that comes with running."

When a friend encouraged him to start talking openly about his experience, he took their advice. One day, a woman he'd never met stopped him in the street and told him that he'd saved her life. She'd been contemplating suicide but had overheard McCracken sharing his story with a group of friends. It inspired her to not give up. To this day, McCracken is unable to relay this encounter without weeping. It was the point at which he knew he'd never again let the stigma of mental illness silence him.

Now in his golden years, and long since retired from the army, McCracken celebrates life's milestones by giving back. For his 65th birthday, he organized a triathlon to raise funds for charity. For his 70th, he sponsored a blood drive. When a knee replacement forced him to abandon running, he embraced bicycle touring. His "Battlefield Bike Rides" have raised over \$50,000 and awareness for the vital work of Wounded Warriors Canada, an organization that provides mental health support for active and retired trauma-exposed professionals and their families. For his 75th birthday next year, McCracken will honour Canada's war heroes with a 2500-kilometre, 42-day unsupported bike ride from the Seaforth Armoury in Vancouver to Valour Road in Winnipeg. Along the way, he aims to raise a further \$75,000 to support his fellow veterans and first responders. To learn more about the project and to support him visit www.TheRoadToValour.ca.

THREADING CHANGE

The future of fashion is youth-led

BY SARA HAROWITZ

SOPHIA YANG JOKES that her parents have no idea what she does for work.

"They're like, 'Something with fashion and forests,'" she says with a smile.

A bit abstract, perhaps, but not entirely wrong, either. Yang, who studied natural resources conservation at UBC's Faculty of Forestry, is the founder of Threading Change: a youth-led organization with the mission of making the fashion industry more equitable and sustainable.

The seeds for Threading Change were planted when Yang was in her last semester at UBC; her roommate bought all of his garments second-hand, which got her thinking a lot about clothing waste. Her watershed moment, however, came the following year, when she attended the 2019 UN Climate Change Conference in Madrid as a youth constituent. Fashion's impact on the climate was barely mentioned (even though the industry contributes eight to 10 per cent of the world's carbon emissions), and there was no discussion of social issues, such as factory working conditions and fair pay. "I left feeling really disappointed," says Yang, "and that's what really spurred me to dive deeper into the industry and see what I can do as a young person."

Yang launched Threading Change in 2020, and it has since grown from a small Vancouver operation to a global initiative with team members based all over the world (Yang, currently based in Calgary, is planning a move to London, England, to be closer to the organization's international partners). Threading Change follows what Yang calls their "tri-impact model" of education, innovation, and consultation. Education means engaging communities around the world – regardless of their age – through school programs, workshops, and flagship events like the Fair Fashion Festival and Global Clothing Swaps. Innovation means introducing resources such as the Global Innovation Story Map, which highlights vetted ethical brands, both from a labour and sustainability perspective. And consultation means working with big fashion brands and governments to influence their climate efforts and policies.



"We're not here to blame consumers; it's not a name and shame game," Yang says, referring to those who buy fast fashion. "We're in a recession. It's understandable. So one of the ways that we really believe, as an organization, that we can influence the industry to do better is through policy."

And, of course, through engaging youth. After all, young people aren't just our future – they're our present. "Gen Z are some of the biggest consumers of fast fashion, but we're also the biggest advocates of ethical fashion," says Yang. "So there's that dichotomy. And brands are really leaning into that fast fashion part to market us really crappy products. But there's this whole other population over here that's really trying to do the right thing – so engage us. We can do this together."

**Sophia Yang,
BSc'19**

⤴

Founder and Creative Executive Officer (CEO) of a non-profit

⤴

Next challenge:
Catalyzing intersectional education in fashion for a fossil-fuel-free fashion future

MY TOWN

Insider travel tips from alumni around the world.

Charla Basran poses in front of a whale mural in Húsavík. The town of approximately 2,400 is often referred to as the “whale-watching capital of Iceland.” Photo by Magdalena Migdal.



Húsavík, Iceland

Dr. Charla Jean Basran (BSc'11) is a UBC Okanagan alum who has lived in Húsavík for the past 10 years. A marine biologist, Basran specializes in whale research at the University of Iceland's Research Centre in Húsavík.

WHAT THREE WORDS BEST DESCRIBE HÚSAVÍK?
Picturesque. Relaxed. Nordic.

HOW DID YOU COME TO LIVE IN HÚSAVÍK?
My passion for marine biology and whale research led me to Húsavík originally to conduct fieldwork for my master's degree. Those initial few months drew me into the town, and over the next several years opportunities arose for me to build a happy life and career here.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT LIVING THERE?
I enjoy living in a small town where the general attitude is very relaxed and where it is possible to feel connected to nature. I love that the town overlooks a beautiful bay where whales come to feed every year, and you can watch the midnight sun touch the ocean in the summertime and the northern lights shine in the wintertime.

DESCRIBE YOUR FAVOURITE NEIGHBOURHOOD.
I like the harbour area the best. It is lively with people and boats coming and going in the summer and offers a beautiful view all year round.

IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT HÚSAVÍK, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
As Húsavík is a small town that relies heavily on tourism in the summer, there are few places that are open and substantially fewer things to do in the wintertime. It would be nice to have more activities and opportunities to socialize during winter.

approximately 2,400 residents, there is a lot to enjoy here during the summertime, including several nice restaurants, a local brewery, geothermal pools, and, of course, opportunities to go whale watching, which is something Húsavík is known for.

WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE HIDDEN GEMS OR ACTIVITIES THAT ONLY LOCALS KNOW ABOUT?
There is a lovely park and pond in

BEST TIME OF YEAR TO VISIT
Summer to early autumn, i.e., June to mid-September.

BEST VIEW
From the lighthouse or from the top of Húsavík Mountain.

BEST CULTURAL EXPERIENCE
Going to the local swimming pools.

LATEST TREND
Using electric scooters to get around town as there is no public transport since Húsavík is so small.

MARKS OUT OF 10 FOR TRANSIT
Although there isn't any transit, everything is within walking distance!

the middle of town – Skrúðgarður (known simply as Húsavík Park in English) – and a hike leading up to Botnsvatn, a lake on Húsavíkurfjall (or Húsavík Mountain), which are mostly only enjoyed by locals.

WHAT'S THE MOST OVERRATED TOURIST HOTSPOT?
Within Húsavík I don't think there is an overrated hotspot.

HOW EASY IS IT TO MEET NEW PEOPLE?
During the summer months, you can easily meet people from all over the world who come to work in the tourism industry, especially for the whale-watching companies. The easiest way to meet locals is to go to the swimming pools and the brewery.

WHAT ISSUES ARE PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT TO THE PEOPLE OF HÚSAVÍK?
The town's future development is particularly important. It can be difficult to find housing, and both housing prices and the general cost of living are high. Finding ways to develop and diversify the town while preserving the culture and surrounding natural environment is always a hot topic.

WHAT IS ONE LOCAL CUSTOM THAT EVERY VISITOR SHOULD KNOW ABOUT?
In Húsavík and all over Iceland, people generally really appreciate the birdlife in the country, and it's important that visitors do as well. You will find many gardens with seeds and apples to attract the birds and, in Húsavík specifically, it is actually illegal to let your cat roam outdoors. Many Icelandic songs and poems refer to birds, and the European golden plover is considered the sign that spring is arriving.

Alumni volunteers host fun My Town Meetups in locations around the world. Check out our Meetups page to see if there's a gathering near you – or sign up to host one in your location.

alumni.ubc.ca/my-town-meetups



REWIND

The Wally Wagon

A sustainable car designed by UBC engineers in 1972 was years ahead of its time.

BY RACHEL GLASSMAN,
BA'18, MA'20



The original Wally Wagon under construction in 1972.
Photo: UBC Archives (UBC 93.1/691)

IN 1971, 150 UBC engineering students set themselves a challenge: to design and build “the ideal urban vehicle.” By 1972, they had their creation: a natural-gas powered car designed to cut pollution by 95 per cent compared to gasoline. They dubbed it “the Wally Wagon” in honour of UBC president and beloved engineering professor Walter Gage.

The Wagon was small but mighty. According to project coordinator Don O’Conner, the car could carry “two people and eight bags of groceries” in style, protected by innovative safety features – like a “drunk test,” requiring the driver to pass a reflex check and open combination locks before the car would start.

The Wally Wagon dazzled, sweeping the 1972 continent-wide Urban Vehicle Design Competition, where it beat over 92 other student entries to win the prize for overall design excellence. The Wally Wagon

returned in a triumphant glow. It was displayed at the PNE, set out on a tour of BC, and inspired future generations of sustainability projects at UBC, like a redesign of Vancouver busses and the 1979 creation of an entirely battery-powered car called “the son of the Wally Wagon.”

Still, the illustrious car wasn’t above a good scandal. In 1973, in the dead of night, five SFU and BCIT students stole the Wally Wagon from the Point Grey campus. The heist was for a good cause: SFU students planned to hold the car ransom until its creators handed over a \$200 donation to the Medical Aid for Vietnam Foundation. Mark Haynes of SFU, one of the Wally Wagon’s captors, told *The Ubyyssey* that “the actual theft went off perfectly,” but “on reaching the bottom of Burnaby Mountain the RCMP seemed to come out of nowhere.” The cops turned the

car around but congratulated the thieves on a deftly planned robbery.

Haynes assured the Wally Wagon’s creators that their prized car was towed “in complete safety,” at a pace never exceeding 30 miles per hour, but UBC engineers threatened to press criminal charges. Those charges were eventually dropped, perhaps inspired by *The Ubyyssey* editorial board pointing out that UBC engineers were accomplished thieves themselves: “We recall recent engineering undergraduate society [EUS] acquisitions have ranged from the nine o’clock gun to *Ubyyssey* columnists and the occasional boa constrictor. If criminal charges were laid in all cases involving EUS stunts, many hundreds of engineers would be getting practical experience engineering breakouts from the BC pen.”



Canada needs to enforce “polluter pays” principle

Big corporations are getting away with catastrophic air pollution – putting Canadians at risk.

BY **DAVID R. BOYD**, PHD’10, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights & environment and Associate Professor of Law, Policy and Sustainability
AMANDA GIANG, Assistant Professor in the Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
CLAIRE EWING, MSC’21

MILLIONS OF KILOGRAMS of toxic pollutants, over 17,000 deaths annually, and environmental laws that aren’t being diligently enforced. This is the troubling picture that emerged when we, a group of environmental researchers, investigated trends in air pollution enforcement in Canada.

Federal and provincial governments share responsibility for regulating air pollution. However, environmental laws and regulations are only useful if they’re properly enforced. Our research shows Canada needs to take greater action in enforcing the widely endorsed “polluter pays” principle for air pollution. According to this principle, those who produce pollution should pay for cleaning up any environmental damage.

We built a publicly-available dataset in Canada of air pollution enforcement actions. We scoured all available sources, creating a database of more than 2,200 enforcement actions that took place between 2000 and 2020 from eight provinces as well as the federal government. This helped us identify patterns in the way air pollution laws were being enforced.

BROKEN RULES

One of the disappointing patterns we saw is that the majority of enforcement actions in our dataset – 63 per cent – were against individuals for offences such as illegal campfires. Meanwhile, only one-third of enforcement actions were brought against companies – including those that had dumped vast volumes of toxic substances into Canada’s air, or caused catastrophic emissions offences (such as the Toronto Sunrise Propane explosion).

Even in the uncommon cases where rules were enforced against large corporations, the penalties imposed were extremely lenient. These penalties amounted to barely a slap on the wrist for repeat industrial polluters.

For example, the mining corporation Rio Tinto was fined \$150,000 in Québec for breaking air pollution laws in 2013. This fine equated to only 0.00023 per cent of the company’s annual revenue. To put this into perspective, if a Canadian family earning the average income of \$62,900 after taxes was given a 0.00023 per cent fine, this would equate to \$14.47.

It’s not surprising, then, that this company would go on to violate air pollution laws again less than one month later. They also violated these laws again in 2016 and 2019.

Even the relatively small fine of \$150,000 is well above the median fine for industrial air polluters. According to our study, fines ranged from \$2,500 to \$10,000 for most types of offences – including excess emissions or violating an environmental standard. This is less than some people would be fined for driving with a suspended license. These fines are less than one per cent of the maximum penalties permitted by law for environmental offences – which range up to \$12 million.

Another concerning pattern our study revealed is that some large industrial polluters are repeat offenders. While government policies indicate there should be increasingly strict enforcement applied in these cases, this doesn’t appear to be the general practice. Instead, chronic law-breakers tended to receive multiple warning letters – not increasingly large fines or prosecutions.

For instance, over the last five years, four provincial orders were reportedly issued against INEOS – one of the world’s largest chemical production companies. These

orders were issued so the company would address its benzene emissions. This toxic chemical is linked with cancer.

Following federal and provincial orders to reduce benzene emissions in 2024, INEOS decided to close the offending facility. The company was never fined for its toxic pollution.

Enforcement actions don’t seem to be taking into account the way human and environmental health are jeopardized by industrial air pollution. Vulnerable or marginalized groups who live near large industrial facilities are particularly at risk of harm.

We found that on average, businesses were generally fined less for committing an actual pollution violation – such as illegally dumping large quantities of contaminants into the air – than they were for failing to notify an enforcement agency that they’d committed a violation.

IMPROVING ENVIRONMENTAL ENFORCEMENT

Canadian enforcement agencies are failing to properly hold high-risk offenders and repeat offenders to account.

But positive change is possible. Going forward, there are three key actions enforcement agencies should take:

- **Increased penalties:** Polluters should pay for their pollution. The consequences of breaking the law should be proportional to the risks to public health and the environment. Substantial mandatory minimum fines should replace the current practice of warning letters and grossly inadequate tickets or fines.
- **Transparency:** The public should have access to environmental information through standardized data on air pollution violations. This information should include who committed the violation, the details and location of what occurred and what was done about it. Ideally, the federal government would co-ordinate and publish all environmental enforcement data from across provinces the same way it publishes a national inventory of industrial pollutant releases.
- **Focus on high-risk offenses:** The focus of enforcement actions should be on high-risk offenders, such as super-polluters (businesses that produce disproportionate volumes of air pollution relative to their competitors), repeat offenders, and inter-provincial offenders.

By properly enforcing environmental regulations, Canada can protect the public from the perils of poor air quality. This would also be a vital step towards realizing everyone’s right to a healthy environment – a right that was recently recognized in an amendment to the Canadian Environmental Protection Act.

This article was originally published in The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/big-corporations-are-getting-away-with-catastrophic-air-pollution-putting-canadians-at-risk-250013>

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FINDINGS



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Mountain biking a significant cause of spinal cord injury in BC

UBC study reveals urgent need for preventative action.

THE RESEARCH:

After witnessing the high number of spinal cord injuries coming out of mountain-bike parks, VGH spine surgeon and professor of orthopaedics Brian Kwon conducted a study into it.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

The alarming number of spinal cord injuries in BC from mountain-bike riding is much higher than those incurred from ice hockey, skiing, or snowboarding.

The findings show that 58 people in BC sustained a spinal cord injury while mountain biking between 2008 and 2022. In the same period, there were only three such injuries from ice hockey. In more recent years, mountain biking injuries in the province have been seven times higher than those from skiing and snowboarding. In fact, the number is comparable to – or higher than – those stemming from amateur football across the entire US.

“These are devastating injuries. There’s nothing quite as excruciating as having to tell a patient that they may never walk again,” said study senior author Dr. Brian Kwon (PhD’04), Canada Research Chair in Spinal Cord Injury and Dvorak Chair of Spine Trauma. Of the 58 cases, 27 were severe, resulting in complete paralysis below the injury site.

The data, which was collected within the national Rick Hansen Spinal Cord Registry through the Praxis Spinal

Cord Institute, shows that 93 per cent of the people injured were healthy young men with an average age of 35.5 years, and 86.3 per cent were wearing helmets.

“It’s important for people to be aware that these injuries can happen to anyone, regardless of a rider’s experience or the difficulty of a trail,” said Kwon, who is director of the International Collaboration on Repair Discoveries (ICORD) – a spinal cord injury research centre of UBC’s faculty of medicine and Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute.

“Helmets and safety gear are absolutely necessary, but they don’t completely eliminate risk, so everyone needs to be informed and vigilant.”

In addition to the significant toll on patients and families, the researchers estimate that the injuries will collectively cost BC \$195.4 million, including lifetime health care and rehabilitation costs, patient expenses, and other economic costs such as loss of productivity.

Mountain biking has rapidly grown in popularity over the last decade, facilitated by lift-equipped bike parks at mountain resorts that provide access to more challenging terrain. As of 2015, over 162 ski resorts in North America offer mountain biking during the summer. In BC, 36 per cent of spinal cord injuries recorded in the study occurred at Whistler Mountain Bike Park.

Kwon says more research is needed to understand how such injuries can be prevented. In the meantime, he hopes the study will encourage discussions and collaboration between health professionals, mountain resorts, and the mountain biking community. Kwon and his colleagues, including Dr. Heather Gainforth, behavioural scientist at UBC Okanagan, are initiating a study to accumulate more information about the injury circumstances

using a survey that has been developed in conjunction with experienced mountain bikers. This data will help to inform a future prevention campaign.

NEW STIR STICK DETECTS DRUGS

THE RESEARCH:

UBC engineers have developed a new stir stick that detects drink spiking in seconds.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

They hope it will be adopted by venues, as an effective way of preventing assaults.

Research shows that about 10 per cent of women and sexual minorities, and about four per cent of heterosexual men have experienced drink

spiking, which involves covertly adding drugs to a drink, often with the intent to cause harm or commit assault. Common drink-spiking drugs such as gamma-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB) and ketamine are tasteless and odourless, and detecting them is nearly impossible without special tools.

“Anywhere there’s a bar – clubs, parties, festivals – there’s a risk,” said Samin Yousefi, a UBC master’s student in chemical and biological engineering and the device’s co-inventor. “People have tried cups, coasters, straws, even nail polish to detect these drugs.

Common drink-spiking drugs such as GHB and ketamine are tasteless and odourless, and detecting them is nearly impossible without special tools.

Our device is more discreet than existing alternatives and doesn’t contaminate the drink.”

Called Spikeless, the tool looks like an ordinary stir stick but is capable of detecting GHB and ketamine within a minute, potentially preventing assaults. It features a chemical on a bioplastic-coated tip that changes colour when it detects harmful concentrations of drugs in any drink. The single-use tool is affordable and intended for large-scale use in public venues such as bars, pubs, restaurants, and festivals.

“Prevention has often focused on individuals, but



▼ Spikeless, a prototype disposable stir stick, detects drugs commonly used in drink spiking. Photo: UBC Applied Science Communications & Marketing.

research and long-standing community health practices show us that these approaches don’t work,” said Sasha Santos, a subject matter expert with more than 20 years’ background in public health, education, and violence prevention who is advising the team.

Early feedback from hospitality professionals has been positive. “If people feel safer because a venue offers Spikeless, that’s a competitive advantage,” says Dr. Johan Foster, associate professor of chemical and biological engineering, who conceptualized the tool in 2011 with his brother, Andrew.

The team developed the prototype at UBC over the last three years, and is now preparing for real-world testing while launching a startup to scale production.

CONSERVING NATURE CAN SHIELD CITIES FROM FLOODS

THE RESEARCH:

A UBC study is the first of its kind in Canada to explore how ecosystems function as natural flood buffers.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

The research revealed that conserving just five per cent of watersheds could shield more than half of urban floodplains.

Picture a forest meadow, a patch of wetland or a stretch of grassland. These quiet spaces, so often overlooked, could be the key to protecting Canada’s cities from floods. Research led by forestry expert Dr. Matthew Mitchell has determined that conserving just five per cent of watersheds (two per cent of Canada’s land) could shield more than half of urban floodplains, safeguarding millions.

When these areas are preserved, they absorb water, slow runoff, and reduce the strain on flood defences. All of this could mean fewer dams, less infrastructure, and fewer floods. From BC’s mountains to Ontario’s wetlands, the study highlights key regions where conservation could have the greatest impact. It underscores the important role ecosystems play in protecting urban populations, including 3.7 million people living in areas directly safeguarded by these ecosystems.

“Conserving nature isn’t just about biodiversity, it’s also about protecting communities and making cities more resilient to climate change,” said Mitchell.

SHORT FICTION CONTEST/ WINNER



Magnificence

BY PHILIP HOLDEN, PHD'94, MED'22
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHELLE PEREIRA

WE MET IN the Buchanan Building every weekday in those early summer months of 1989. In the first week we were all eager and would arrive early, peering into the classroom through a peephole window crossed by a grid of wires, and then pushing against the heavy door. We'd settle down on steel chairs fixed to the classroom floor, flip up our desktops, and take out our *Practical Chinese Readers*.

The rear seats always filled up first, leaving latecomers at the front. Wind stirred the leaves of the catalpa trees outside, kneading light. Patterns formed and shifted on the grey linoleum floor. Mrs. Hsieh would arrive, turn her back to us, and scratch out characters and their transliterations in white chalk on the dark green board. Then she'd turn to face us. We'd greet her and then pick up our textbooks, their green covers also patterned with leaves, the cursive characters of their titles in vertical boxes just like the peephole window in the door. Our fingers flipped through their pages, startling up words, tables, and pictures like a flock of birds into flight. They settled at the beginning of Chapter 42. Each of us read out loud in turn.

Gubo and Palanka are visiting Beijing, we read. They are exploring the sights. Today they are at Tiananmen Square. In the middle is the Monument to the People's Heroes. To the west is the Great Hall of The People. To the east is the Chinese History Museum. So *meili*. So beautiful. So *zhuangli*. So magnificent. What is the difference between *meili* and *zhuangli*? Mrs. Hsieh asked us. We looked down at our open books and did not meet her eyes.

She waited, and then continued. A difference of degree, she told us, and of feeling. The flowers in their beds are *meili*, are beautiful. The Monument to the People's Heroes in the Square is *zhuangli*, magnificent, because of the martyrs' sacrifice.

In those early classes, we did not talk of the other Square, the other Gate, the other Monument, the sights that flickered through our television screens each evening on CNN, and fixed themselves in photographs in the morning newspapers. In this Square, students and workers milled around, carrying banners. The Monument to the People's Heroes was covered first by a mourning photograph of Hu Yaobang in black and white, framed by couplets and flowers. Then, as the protests grew, it was wrapped up in banners. We struggled to decipher them, and the slogans the marching students carried, copying out the characters, looking up the radicals, counting off the strokes. *Qinghua University Foreign Language Department. Dialogue! Don't Be a Flower in a Vase. Democracy and Freedom.*

In the afternoons, our fingers would ache. We had devoured our textbooks all morning and were sleepy. The sun went in. Gubo and Palanka were like ghosts. The Tiananmen Square they walked in was immaculately clean. They strolled by the Monument and up to the Gate itself. The Gate, an old man told them, was more than 30 metres high. The square could hold a million people. The Great Hall could sit thousands. Feudalism and Capitalism had been abolished. All was well.

At this point Mrs. Hsieh's face puckered up. She took a deep breath and

broke off. Relief washed over us. We were the non-heritage class, our heads a sea of black with islands of red, gold, and grey. The pace of the class was fast, and the homework unrelenting. Our Chinese had already been planed and trimmed over the last two semesters of the regular school year. Residual Cantonese speakers no longer spoke of salmon as *sanmanyu*, but as *guiyu*; Southeast Asian migrants' children now knew that a bus is *gon-gonggiche*, not a *base*. But many of us struggled to keep up with the syllabus, stuttering nervously when we read out. So we were happy that Liu Huiling, whose Mandarin, drilled in a Chinese primary school in Malaysia, was the best in the class, distracted Mrs. Hsieh when she paused.

Hsieh laoshi, is it true that you grew up in Beijing? Before Liberation?

She'd hesitate, but she'd take the bait and tell us of her childhood in a courtyard house. About the ship, crammed with refugees, that took her to Taiwan as a teenager, and then her later journey here, her first flight, across the Pacific, to the very end of the world. And then she'd pause, sigh, remember where she was, remember the Square, and ask the next of us on her list to read.

In the first week of class, we only knew each other by our Chinese names. In lunch breaks at the SUB, sitting in small circles, we'd shyly exchange our names in English. Liu Huiling was Stacy Law; Huang Ya Lan was Heidi Wang; Zhang Jianwen was Kian Woon Teo ("but call me Ken"); Ma Taimu was Tim Matheson. We shared the contents of our lunch boxes. We showed each other our new dictionaries and our flash

cards, compared the spidery characters that we'd written out again and again the night before. We'd laugh and dodge the sudden showers and return to class.

Each night we tried to do homework but end up watching television; each morning we read the newspapers. We'd see a surge of humanity in the Square. The open hand of dialogue, and then the fist of tanks on the roads outside the capital. Each day we'd return to class. We'd read, write, and speak. We'd learn new grammatical forms. The modal particle *ba*, which softens advice or commands. Study, *ba*. Remember. Witness. If we can do nothing about the other Square, let us at least do this. Learn. Store things away for a future we cannot know, as students have always done.

At weekends, some of us attended protests on campus or downtown. At lunchtime, as the weeks moved forward, we tried to talk together in Chinese. The students had brought a plaster statue of the *Minzhu zi Shen*, the Goddess of Democracy, into the Square. She towered above the Monument, above the Mausoleum. She was all white; she carried a torch; her hair was blown back by the wind.

They shouldn't do this, said Li Qimian. *They shouldn't bring this piece of America into the square.*

It's not simply American, it's a universal..., objected Zhang Jianwen. As he fumbled for a word, Liu Huiling provided it — *yuan li* — *principle*, even though she was unsure if she agreed.

Our double lives moved forward. Our lunch breaks stretched longer, and the group that gathered in the SUB thinned out. We'd return late for class, and trip on the worn stairs, sandals flapping on linoleum risers capped with battered metal treads. Li Qimian and Guo Wanling were often delayed. They'd return separately, even though we knew they were together. They'd run into each other on Wreck Beach, each on that first meeting staring into the other's face, eyes not daring to look down. Later they'd walk together, hand in hand, the water lapping at their ankles. Li Qimian noticed that Guo Wanling had keloids on the upper arm, scratches like the *na* stroke in a Chinese character, the one that presses and falls away. A week later, they'd trace the scars in darkness, under the sheets, fingers touching together and falling down the axes of each other's bodies, from lips to the thighs.

Where are Guo Wanling and Li Qimian? Mrs. Hsieh asked us, when it was their turn to read.

They are exploring the sights, Liu Huiling replied, and our faces scrunched up as we tried not to laugh. And then, after six weeks, the class was over, and we went our separate ways. The Square was already empty: it had become the clean, silent Square of our textbook once again. We rubbed our eyes: we no longer saw with double sight.

We did not keep in touch much in the years after that. Chance meetings on the SkyTrain or a restaurant, or an airport lounge in Vancouver, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. Some of us stayed put. Life blew others off course and then back again, across oceans, to the campus that for us would always be on the edge of the world.

The future that Mrs. Hsieh told us about scrolled by. Years later, in another century, airports, shops, workplaces, and classrooms suddenly closed. For some of us, remembering that summer long ago, something began to throb. We'd touch our arms and realize we were tracing the lines of scars. In late March, Guo Wanling and Li Qimian came back to campus and stood in front of the Goddess of Democracy statue by the Bosque. The trees were black and bare, just beginning to bud. They adjusted the masks on their faces in the rain, but Li Qimian's glasses still steamed up. Their hair was flecked with grey. They shivered. Their joints ached. Someone had placed a photograph of Li Wenliang, the doctor from Wuhan who gave the warning about COVID, at the base of the statue. Couplets and garlands of white flowers were disintegrating in the rain.

They hold hands. They still cling to those words they learned in the classroom that summer, almost half a lifetime ago. Mandarin is a language that they use, awkwardly, with older relatives. A secret language when they travel in America, in train cars and in elevators, when they do not want to be overheard. A public language in China, when they stop and ask for directions: in Taiwan, too, and even now in Hong Kong. As we age, it becomes less easy to hold a word in mind. Tones slip. Characters crumble and vanish and run away beneath our pens. We sketch out radicals but cannot remember the remaining strokes. So our characters are full of holes. *Bai zi xiansheng*, we call each other, Mr. White Character: at least Guo Wanling and Li Qimian have a companion to complete each other's words. As we age there are prosthetics and walking aids. We use



apps now, online dictionaries, instant translation, optical character recognition: our fingers hover and settle on tiny handheld screens, on this promontory at the end of the world.

Their faces are wet now, but not from the rain. Witness. Study. The modal particle *ba*. Remember the distinction between beauty and magnificence. The flowers are broken; they are not beautiful. The monument is small and stained; it is not magnificent. And yet beauty and magnificence are there.

"Magnificent" is the winning entry in alumni UBC's second annual short fiction contest for alumni.

Philip Holden is a scholar, writer, and counsellor. After an academic career in Singapore, he now lives between two continents, and his work practices of storytelling and mental health. A reworked version of his Singapore short story collection Heaven Has Eyes will be published by Gaudy Boy in 2026. The runners-up were Barb Howard, BA'85, and Sophia Collins, BSc'24. Their stories can be read online at magazine.alumni.ubc.ca/department/short-fiction The Short Fiction Contest is presented in partnership with UBC's School of Creative Writing and UBC Okanagan's Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies.

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PRESIDENT'S HIGHLIGHT

From stem cells to robots

Dr. Benoit-Antoine Bacon
UBC President and Vice-Chancellor

A look inside the Gordon B. Shrum Building – the new home of UBC's School of Biomedical Engineering.

THE BEST PART of any president's job is to see up close the research, teaching, learning, and innovation that define great universities like UBC.

A perfect example was the official opening of the Gordon B. Shrum Building, the new home of UBC's School of Biomedical Engineering, on April 7. That morning, about 150 guests gathered – researchers, alumni, donors, and leaders from the biotech and medical technology sectors – united by a shared commitment to advancing life sciences and health innovation in British Columbia.

The unveiling of the building's official name and plaque was a proud moment, but the real highlights came during the tour that followed. To walk through this state-of-the-art facility and witness, firsthand, the exceptional work of our researchers and students was both inspiring and humbling.

In Dr. Nika Shakiba's lab, we learned about her team's work to understand how stem cells make decisions about their own fate – a fundamental question with major implications for medicine. The lab is developing tools that can both model and guide these decisions, with the goal of engineering cells that can be used to treat disease. For example, one area of focus involves coaxing stem cells to reliably become beta cells – a type of cell in the pancreas responsible for producing insulin. This work could one

day lead to new therapies for patients with diabetes and even make personalized cell therapies more accessible and effective.

In Dr. Peter Zandstra's lab, I was reminded of the school's founding vision of bringing together engineering, biology, and medicine in the service of addressing complex health challenges. He spoke about how the new facility enables researchers, students, and industry partners to collaborate more effectively than ever before – pushing boundaries, accelerating discoveries, and creating transformative health technologies that can move from the lab to real-world application with greater speed and impact.

Dr. Zandstra came to UBC in 2017 as the founding director of the School of Biomedical Engineering (SBME) and was involved from the very beginning in helping bring the new facility to fruition. You can imagine his pride on that day! He showed us the striking four-storey mural in the middle of the building – a full-circle moment when he told us about how his former student, Dr. Jen Ma, is the artist who created the piece. Ma completed her PhD in stem cell bioengineering under Dr. Zandstra's supervision. Her artwork and its sweeping forms represent SBME's technology and engineering approaches that seamlessly integrate with the human body at multiple scales.



▶ (Left) The Gordon B. Shrum Building on University Boulevard.
Photo: Michael Elkin Photography

(Below, Top) A UBC student takes advantage of state-of-the-art lab space. Photo: Phillip Chin

(Below, Bottom) A giant robotic arm is helping researchers understand the mechanics of injury in high-impact events like car crashes. Photo: Paul Joseph / UBC Brand & Marketing

Here is another full-circle moment: Several members of the Patkau Architects project team who designed the building are UBC alumni from UBC's Master of Architecture degree program. What an incredible moment to see our own grads bring their talents back to their alma mater to create this beautiful space.

We also visited Dr. Peter Cripton's lab, where members of his research team, Loay Al-Salehi and Jeff Nickel, demonstrated a giant orange robotic arm that is so large it occupies an entire room in one of the basement labs. With a giant teddy bear strapped into a seat on the robot like a crash test dummy, they ran a realistic simulation of a vehicle rollover crash. It was both funny and a little scary. There were no volunteers to sit in that seat! While the team's work might look playful, its purpose is vital: to understand the mechanics of injury in high-impact events like car crashes and to develop better technologies to prevent serious injury and harm.

Every corner of the Gordon B. Shrum Building was built to foster creativity and innovation. The five-storey, 158,000-square-foot facility seamlessly integrates cutting-edge technology with collaborative spaces. It's not just an architectural achievement; the space itself is a living laboratory for research discovery and collaboration.

This incredible facility, the first of its kind in Canada, was made possible by the vision and generosity of our donors who gave more than \$30 million in philanthropic contributions – including from the Gordon B. Shrum Charitable Fund, the Conconi Family Foundation, United Therapeutics Corporation, Dr. Jim McEwen, and Paul and Nicole Geyer. The Government of British Columbia also contributed a remarkable \$25 million investment that will pay off for all British Columbians.

After the event, I hopped in a cab and made my way to the airport – en route to a Universities Canada meeting in Halifax. I carried with me a renewed sense of energy as I headed into another full week of meetings. But that's the rhythm of this role, and it's the moments I get to spend seeing innovation in action that make it so meaningful.

The Gordon B. Shrum Building marks a bold new chapter for UBC's School of Biomedical Engineering. But what excites me most isn't just the building – it's the sense that its best stories haven't even been written yet.

I can't wait to see what the next page holds.



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Watch & Listen

PODCASTS

From Here Forward shares stories and ideas about amazing things UBC and its alumni are doing around the world. It covers people and places, truths, science, art, and accomplishments with the view that sharing better inspires better. Join hosts Carol Eugene Park (MJ'20) and Jeevan Sangha (BA'22) in exploring solutions for the negative stuff out there – focussing on the good for a change, from here forward.

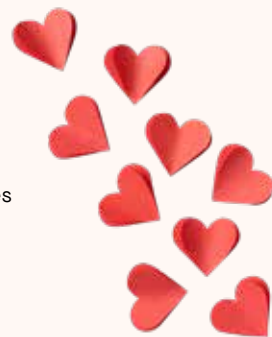


magazine.alumni.ubc.ca/podcasts/here-forward



BEYOND “HAPPY EVER AFTER”: THE TRUTH ABOUT LOVE >>

What’s the relationship between love and happiness? The answer is not as simple as you might think. Carrie Jenkins (MFA'20), a writer and professor of philosophy at UBC, discusses her research to understand love in all its forms. She discusses the limitations of romantic love, the stigma of singlehood, the realities of non-monogamy, and the social constructs that connect them all.



THE STRESS-RELIEVING BENEFITS OF BREAKING GLASS

Did you know that UBC has a glassblower on staff? Brian Ditchburn is the scientific glassblower for UBC’s chemistry department. Find out what a typical day looks like for him and why he feels that his job is the best on campus. Brian also shares his philosophy about the impermanence of glass and how he sometimes helps students relieve stress with a little destructive therapy.

SCANNING FROM AFAR: HOW A UBC INNOVATION IS IMPROVING ULTRASOUND ACCESS

People living in remote locations who require urgent ultrasounds need to travel to a major city for the diagnostic test. A UBC researcher is looking to change that. David Black (BASC'21), a PhD candidate in electrical and computer engineering, has been working on remote ultrasound imaging. Learn how he’s tapping into the power of mixed reality – which enables interactions between physical and digital worlds – to bring ultrasound diagnostics directly to patients.

WEBCASTS



Learn from the experts.

magazine.alumni.ubc.ca/webcasts

FINDING OUR WAY TO A CLEAN ECONOMY

Clean energy technology is here – so why isn’t it used more widely? From economics to human behaviour, an expert panel guides us through barriers to change and what’s contributing to our resistance, and helps us determine how we can expedite the transition to a clean economy.

MEDTALKS: EMBRACING COLLABORATIVE CANCER CARE

Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a team to care for a patient with cancer and other chronic illnesses. Experts from clinical research, dentistry, dietetics, pharmaceutical sciences, and counselling offer insights on how collaborative approaches improve outcomes for patients. Discover why integrated care is essential, and learn how you can support yourself and loved ones through their treatment journeys.



TRANSFORMING OUR HEALTH WITH AI <<

As AI continues to revolutionize our world, how can we harness its power to protect and improve our health? Could we even use it to change the course of an illness or disease? Find out about AI’s potential role in everything from prevention and early detection to treatment and recovery.

CAREER WEBCASTS

USE YOUR STRENGTHS TO BECOME A SUPERCOMMUNICATOR

In today’s era of hybrid and remote work, effective communication is essential for success – that’s why supercommunicators are in high demand. Rob Kim of *alumni UBC* explains how to become one by gaining a deeper understanding of your strengths with the Gallup CliftonStrengths Assessment. By leveraging what you do best, you’ll augment your ability to express yourself, build buy-in, and strategize new directions.

CULTIVATE CREATIVITY IN YOUR WORK

Have you ever wondered if your work is creative? If so, perhaps a better question to ask is: “How is my work creative?” UBC Sauder School of Business lecturer Kari Marken (PhD'19) encourages you to recognize and enhance creativity within yourself, and explains how creativity is a learned process. Discover how you can cultivate a creative culture in your workplace.

EMBRACE CHANGE TO UNLOCK YOUR POTENTIAL >>

At some point, we all face the daunting prospect of adapting to change. By reframing transitions as opportunities, we can embrace growth. Dive into the complexities of personal and professional development with leadership coach and consultant Laura Dowling (BA'09). Learn about the capacity required for change, how managing emotions is essential for ongoing process, and how we can better prepare ourselves for life’s possibilities.



CAMPUS SEEN

On a grey November day, a peculiar parade of flatbed trucks made its way slowly and gingerly across campus. Their precious load was a piece of UBC history: the Old Fire Hall. This tall, claret-red structure was built in 1926, just one year after the inaugural campus buildings. It featured three vehicle bays, a hose drying tower, and residential areas. For 56 years, the hall accommodated firefighters at its location on West Mall. In 1982, when the city assumed firefighting services, UBC’s Art History, Visual Art and Theory department adopted the decommissioned hall and repurposed it as a beloved artist studio space. Decades later, the hall has another new lease on life: lifted from West Mall (to make room for an 11-storey Sauder tower), it will find a home in a redeveloped student residence near St. John’s College. ~ *Audrey Waking*



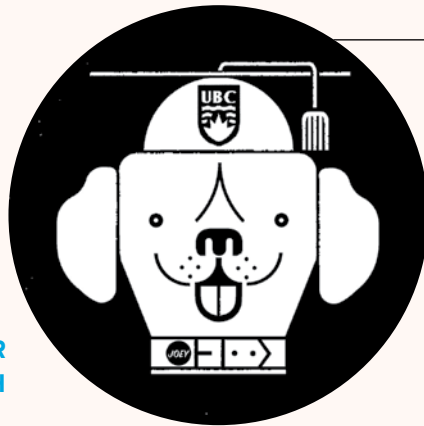
Photo: Sachi Wickramasinghe / UBC Media Relations

THE SCOOP

Oscars, Orcas, and Orbits

1. ON AUGUST 7, 2024, "MINI-MOON" 2024 PT5 WAS SPOTTED ORBITING EARTH. ACCORDING TO ASTRONOMY PROFESSOR BRETT GLADMAN, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT IT IS FALSE?

- a. 2024 PT5 is around 10 metres wide
- b. 2024 PT5 is scientifically considered a moon
- c. 2024 PT5 will stick around until around November 2024
- d. 2024 PT5 is not forecast to hit Earth



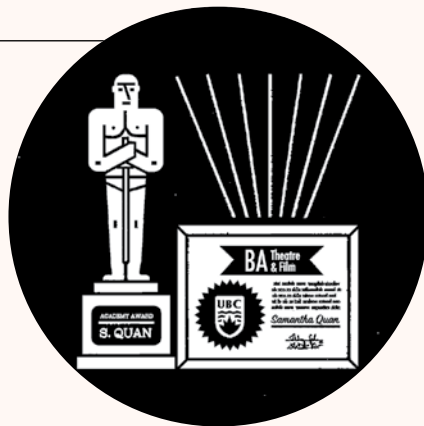
2. ORCAS ARE SOMETIMES SEEN WEARING DEAD SALMON AS "HATS." ACCORDING TO ZOOLOGY PROFESSOR ANDREW TRITES, WHAT IS PROBABLY NOT A REASON FOR THIS BEHAVIOUR?

- a. To carry food
- b. Playfulness
- c. To impress other members of the pod
- d. They like the smell of dead fish



3. AT THE 2025 ACADEMY AWARDS, UBC THEATRE ALUM SAMANTHA QUAN WON AN OSCAR FOR PRODUCING THE FILM...

- a. Anora
- b. Wicked
- c. Conclave
- d. Dune: Part Two



4. TRUE OR FALSE: ACCORDING TO UBCO RESEARCH, ZOOM MEETINGS NEGATIVELY AFFECT FIRST IMPRESSIONS, COMPARED TO IN-PERSON MEETINGS.

5. PROF EMERITUS STANLEY COREN POSTED A VIRAL VIDEO ON TIKTOK FEATURING HIS GOLDEN RETRIEVER, JOEY. WHAT WAS JOEY DOING?

- a. Making a pup angel in the snow
- b. Sitting next to strangers and pretending he's their dog
- c. Cuddling with his pal Cork the corgi
- d. Studiously attending a lecture at UBC

6. WHAT DID THE FILM GLADIATOR II GET RIGHT, ACCORDING TO SCHOLARS OF ANCIENT ROME DRS. CHARMAINE GORRIE AND SIOBHÁN M'ELDUFF?

- a. In most gladiator matches, contestants fought to the death
- b. Lucilla and Lucius were significant threats to the rulers of Rome
- c. The cinematic gladiator fights are just as spectacular as the historic events
- d. None of the above

1b). 2024 PT5 is a small asteroid about nine times further away from Earth than our moon.

2a). The latest recorded sighting of an orca with a fishy bonnet occurred last October in Puget Sound. Whatever the reason for it, Trites takes it as a good sign that the previously-struggling southern residents have enough time and food to play around.

3a). Vancouver-born producer Quan shared the Best Picture award with Sean Baker and Alex Coco.

4. False. A study led by Dr. Lauren Human showed that people can accurately judge most personality traits and form positive first impressions via Zoom.

5b). The video has since amassed over 4 million Likes. As well as his research in psychology, Coren is known for his books about dogs.

6d). In reality, some estimate that only 10-20% of fights ended in death. Lucilla was killed years before Commodus' reign ended, and Lucius died young. Gladiator fights were probably more spectacular than the movies depict; some involved 10,000 fighters and lasted 120 days.

NEWS FLASH



VANCOUVER

WORLD CUP MEN'S TEAM TO TRAIN AT UBC

The City of Vancouver plans to relocate the Canadian men's national soccer team's training facility from a neighbourhood park to UBC, in preparation for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. The original intention to turn Memorial South Park into a practice facility faced public backlash, as it would have rendered the popular walking track inaccessible. The soccer team will now train at the National Soccer Development Centre, a state-of-the-art facility and home of the Vancouver Whitecaps FC.

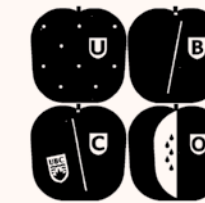
POLLINATOR HEAVEN BRINGS BIODIVERSITY

Main Mall's manicured lawns have turned into a meadow; seeds from 2024 have flourished, growing into a vibrant pollinator haven that will return each spring. Beyond its beauty, the meadow includes native plants from the endangered Garry Oak ecosystem, aligning campus more closely with its biodiversity goals.

STUDENTS DESIGN TINY HOME

A group of UBC students are spending their weekends constructing a tiny home powered by renewable energy. The Sustainable Mobile Research Testbed (SMRT) is a house on wheels measuring 2.4 by 6.7 metres. Its sustainable features include a solar-powered water pump, a rainwater harvesting system, and a small-scale wind turbine that can power basic amenities (for example, a mini fridge). The SMRT project addresses both climate change and affordable housing: its mobility and use of clean tech lends it resilience to extreme climate events, while its size makes it a cheap and modular housing option. The students plan on releasing a free instruction guide for building their design.

Illustrations: Raymond Beisinger



OKANAGAN

INDIGENOUS ARTWORK

The UBC Okanagan gallery has added 16 new pieces by Indigenous artists to its Public Art Collection, spanning from the 1960s to 2009. Among the highlights is *Thunderbird* (circa 1960) by Chief Henry Speck, a pioneering artist recognized for his distinctive visual style and early adoption of silkscreen printmaking. The pieces were donated by Milton McClaren and his late wife, Della McClaren.

PROF WINS NON-FICTION PRIZE

Political Science professor Wendy Wong's book *We, The Data: Human Rights in the Digital Age* has won the Balsillie Prize, an award for the best non-fiction book on public issues relevant to Canadians. Her book explores how tech companies influence people's lives by leveraging the vast amount of personal data generated in everyday online interactions. It describes how technologies like AI have indelibly changed society – but not always for the better.

3D VIRTUAL REALITY FIELD TRIP

Inspired by his virtual visit to the International Space Station – courtesy of the world's largest virtual reality (VR) exhibit – assistant professor of teaching Vikas Menghwani is determined to take UBC Okanagan students on similar one-of-a-kind "field trips."

To create his first virtual field trip – to a bioenergy power plant on the Vancouver campus – Menghwani is using a hi-tech video wall based in UBC Okanagan's Visualization and Emerging Media Studio. Using 3D glasses and a controller, students will be able to navigate the power plant as a group and view interactive videos featuring the plant's chief engineer – all from UBCO's campus.

64 years

The record-breaking amount of time it took for UBC alum Robert Murray (now 83) to return a book he borrowed from the UBC Library as a student. It was a 1931 edition of *Camping and woodcraft: Handbook for vacation campers and for travelers in the wilderness.*

12K/\$4.8 million

A UBC study found that each locally born hockey team member playing for a full NHL season increases home game attendance by about 12,000 spectators and boosts team revenue by about US\$4.8 million annually.

43

UBC Okanagan is building what will eventually be Kelowna's tallest building: a 43-storey vertical campus located downtown. Despite delays, setbacks, and some controversy, completion is expected by fall 2027.

45%

A new UBC study demonstrated that distracted pedestrians (people texting while walking, for example) face a 45 per cent increase in the severity of vehicle interactions and near misses.

20th

On July 1, 2025, UBC Okanagan will mark two decades of teaching, learning, research, and community advancement.

IN MEMORIAM

Obituaries are published in full on the magazine's website at magazine.ubc.ca/in-memoriam, with listings included in our spring and fall print issues. Please submit obituaries at magazine.ubc.ca/memoriam-submissions.

Ian Wright, Professor Emeritus
Gail Bellward, Professor Emeritus
Raja Abboud, Professor Emeritus
Donald Ian Williamson, BA'50
John Skelton Belrose, BAsC'50, MASc'52
George Alden Worden, BAsC'51, BA'51
Frederick William Wiley, BSc'53
Robert Woodward, BA'53
Edwin B. Parker, BA'54
Raymond George Johnson, BAsC'55
Gurdev Singh Gill, MD'57, DSc'96
Harvey Leonard Dyck, BA'57, MA'58
Patricia Abbott, BA'60
Phyllis Claudette Randle, Dip. PHN'67
Ronald Howard Hall, BSc'67, MSc'70
Richard Thomas Holt, Ph'68
Chin Choon Khor, MSc'73
Paul Edward Yanko, BSc'76, PhD'80
Patricia Filan, Teaching Program'80
Bruce Eaket, BSc'89, MBA'96
Fernando Rodríguez, MPPGA'17
Wilson Dargbeh, MPPGA'22

Hemas Kla-Lee-Lee-Kla (Bill Wilson), LLB'73

Hemas Kla-Lee-Lee-Kla (William "Bill" Lane Wilson) – Hereditary Chief of the Musgamagw Dzawada'enuxw people – passed away on January 24, 2025, in Campbell River. He was a proud member of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation and We Wai Kai (Cape Mudge).

Hemas Kla-Lee-Lee-Kla – whose name means *Number one amongst the eagles, the Chief who is always there to help* – lived a life dedicated to justice, leadership, and the advancement of Indigenous rights.

Born in Comox on April 6, 1944, to Ethel Pearson (Pugladee) and Charles William Wilson, Bill was raised with the values of his Clan, embodied by his mother's highest-ranking Clan name, Pugladee, meaning *a good host*. He was among the first First Nations students to attend



Comox Elementary, Robb Road, and Courtenay Senior High School, where he met his former wife, Sandra Raylene Wilson (née Hindle). Bill went on to become the second First Nations person to graduate from UBC's law school, a testament to his determination and trailblazing spirit.

For over 30 years, Bill shared his life with Bev Sellars – a partner in leadership and advocacy for Indigenous peoples. He was a devoted father to his children, Kory, Jody, Corey, and William, and a proud grandfather to five grandchildren. Bill also leaves behind a large and loving extended family.

Bill was part of a transformative generation of Indigenous leaders who brought the struggle for Indigenous rights into the Canadian consciousness. While his mother and others worked in the shadows to preserve their culture, Bill stepped into the light, helping to affirm Indigenous rights in the Canadian Constitution and paving the way for reconciliation.

A compelling orator, Bill was known for his fierce precision, humour, and charm. Whether addressing his community or debating a prime minister, he inspired laughter, learning, and a call to action. He believed in the potential of his people and demanded that everyone strive to do better. His legacy lives on in the progress made by Indigenous communities today: the affirmation of Indigenous rights, advancing treaty negotiations, and the growing recognition of reconciliation as a national imperative. Bill's work ensured that Indigenous leaders and their causes are no longer hidden in the shadows.

Bill believed deeply in the potential of his children and all Indigenous youth. His family is committed to continuing the work he championed and have established a memorial fund to support First Nations students at UBC's Allard Law: give.ubc.ca/memoriam/hemas-kla-lee-lee-kla

They extend their heartfelt gratitude to all who showed Bill love, friendship, and respect throughout his life, and helped make his journey impactful and meaningful.

Julia Levy, OC, BA'55, PhD, DSc'01

Dr. Julia Levy, a trailblazing scientist and entrepreneur, died on December 5, 2024. Embarking on her career at a time when men dominated the realms of STEM, academia, and business, she developed and commercialized life-changing medical treatments, while raising up the next generation of innovators behind her.

In 1955, when arts and science were still one faculty at UBC, Julia graduated with a bachelor's in immunology and bacteriology. She went on to earn a PhD in experimental pathology from the University of London and completed postdoctoral research at University College London. In 1959, Julia returned to UBC, becoming the first woman to hold a tenure-track faculty position in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, and later rising to the rank of full professor.

Julia's lab focused on cancer immunology and adopted photodynamic therapy – a treatment that uses light to activate toxic compounds and damage abnormal cells – to treat cancers and other conditions. Her research led to a promising treatment for age-related macular degeneration (AMD), a leading cause of blindness among seniors. By this time, Julia had entered the world of business, co-founding the biopharmaceutical company Quadra Logic Technologies (QLT) in 1981. At QLT, Julia co-invented Visudyne, the first medical treatment for AMD, which enabled thousands of users to see.

Under Julia's leadership, QLT attracted international acclaim and reached billion-dollar status, launching Canadian biotechnology onto the global stage. Julia's work cemented UBC's reputation for cutting-edge science and fuelled local entrepreneurship. Royalties from QLT also funded further teaching and research at UBC.

Throughout her career, Julia was a highly respected and cherished mentor to many UBC students, inspiring emerging scientists, especially women, to pursue careers in STEM. Even after she retired, Julia counselled biotechnology and life science startups in the



Creative Destruction Lab at UBC's Sauder School of Business.

Julia's contributions to science earned her numerous distinctions, including an appointment to the Royal Society of Canada, the Order of Canada, and the Helen Keller Award for Contributions to Vision. In 2006, the Society of Chemical Industry (SCI) established the Julia Levy Award, which recognizes Canadians who successfully commercialize innovation.

She received six honorary doctorates, including one from UBC. During her 2001 UBC convocation speech, Julia reflected: "Being part of something which started out as fascinating science and ended up by effectively changing the lives of thousands of people is an incredible experience. I feel truly blessed to have been part of that."

Julia, who with her loving husband Ed was a staunch supporter of BC Civil Liberties Association, chose to die using medical assistance (MAiD). Those interested in learning more about her legacy can read her memoir, *In Sight: My Life in Science and Biotech*.

Jack Taunton, OC, MD'76

UBC mourns the loss of professor emeritus of medicine Dr. Jack Taunton, a giant in the field of Canadian sport and exercise medicine. He leaves a rich legacy of support for athletes and for the health and fitness of the wider community.

As a child, Jack faced serious health

complications, which kickstarted his lifelong interest in sport medicine. He went on to attend UBC's medical school, where he was a top student despite his struggles with dyslexia.

Throughout his studies, Jack balanced school and athletics. He became a nationally ranked marathoner, completing 60 races with a personal best of 2:25:29. In 1971, Jack founded Canada's first road-running club, the Lions Gate Road Runners, alongside fellow distance runners Ivor Davies, Bob Cormack, and Ed Macdonald. They later founded the Vancouver Marathon, with Jack as the driving force. The Vancouver Sun Run was co-founded by Jack, UBC physician Doug Clement, and Olympian Ken Elmer, and their wives Cheryl Taunton, Diane Clement, and Janet Elmer.

After completing his MD, Jack co-founded the Allan McGavin Sports Medicine Centre. The centre's director for over 25 years, he cared for athletes as a doctor and coach and supported students as a graduate supervisor and clinical teacher. He continued to establish multiple organizations and initiatives dedicated to community fitness, notably SportMedBC and the BC Brain Wellness Program.

Jack's achievements span beyond the Canadian stage. He supported athlete



health at eight Olympic Games, serving as Team Canada's Chief Medical Officer during the 2000 Sydney Olympics; Chief Medical Officer for the Organizing Committee for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics/Paralympics; and Medical Officer for Canada at Commonwealth Games and the Los Angeles ('84), Seoul ('88), and Barcelona ('92) Olympics. In 2010, Jack earned a rare distinction from the International Olympic Committee for the best sport medicine program in the Olympic Games' host history.

Over his lifetime, Jack facilitated hundreds of events locally and abroad, including coordinating the medical portion of Rick Hansen's Man in Motion World Tour – he even ran beside Hansen for nearly 100km a day across Alberta and part of Saskatchewan.

Jack's work garnered him numerous accolades, among them an appointment to the Order of Canada and induction into the BC Sports Hall of Fame and the Richmond Sports Wall of Fame at the Olympic Oval.

A Thunderbird through and through, Jack never stopped supporting students and athletes; he was most recently working to organize medical team support for the upcoming Invictus Games 2025 Vancouver/Whistler. UBC is grateful for Jack's tireless devotion to the community, and for his unwavering dedication to helping athletes succeed.

Yes!



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THE LAST WORD



Susan Musgrave

Wild heart, kind spirit.

WHO WAS YOUR CHILDHOOD HERO?

Davy Crockett, king of the wild-gone deer (a mondegreen: it was actually “King of the Wild Frontier”).

WHAT WAS THE LAST THING YOU READ?

Kathy Fagan’s *Sycamore*, and Michelle Gallen’s *Factory Girls*.

WHAT OR WHO MAKES YOU LAUGH OUT LOUD?

My husband, Stephen Reid, always made me laugh. Now that he is dead, I have to make myself laugh.

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON YOU EVER LEARNED?

To be kind, no matter what.

WHAT WAS YOUR NICKNAME AT SCHOOL?

Pigeon-Toed Pete. (I always thought it was a result of having polio when I was a baby, but I have learned that it is due to the foot being positioned in a certain way inside the uterus before one is born.)

CLAIM TO FAME

Award-winning writer of more than 35 books, with poetry her most prolific form.

She married her third husband, the late novelist and memoirist Stephen Reid, after he sent her his book manuscript from prison, where he was serving time for bank robbery. Their lives were later the subject of 1999 CBC documentary “The Poet and the Bandit.”

UBC CONNECTION

Lecturer (poetry) for the School of Creative Writing.

RECENT WORKS

Her last book of poems, *Exculpatory Lilies* (2022), was written after losing Stephen in 2018 and their daughter Sophie in 2021, who died from an accidental drug overdose. *Hunger*, a selection of poetry from her last four books, will be released by Wilfrid Laurier University Press this August.

More Q&As with Susan Musgrave at magazine.alumni.ubc.ca/susan-musgrave

WHAT IS YOUR MOST PRIZED POSSESSION?

My memories of Stephen and Sophie.

WHAT’S THE STRANGEST FAN ENCOUNTER YOU’VE EVER HAD?

A man in New York brought me pages of my first book to autograph. They were covered in blood.

APART FROM THE ESSENTIALS FOR LIFE, WHAT CAN’T YOU DO WITHOUT?

The wind.

IF A GENIE GRANTED YOU ONE WISH, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

To have my daughter back.

WHAT ITEM HAVE YOU OWNED FOR THE LONGEST TIME?

My silver bracelet, carved by Gordon Cross of Skidegate, Haida Gwaii, in 1972.

WHOM DO YOU MOST ADMIRE (LIVING OR DEAD) AND WHY?

My neighbour, Tim Toman. He fixes everything that is broken, and then thanks me for letting him do the job.

WHAT WOULD BE THE TITLE OF YOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

Memoir of an Amnesiac

WHAT IS YOUR LATEST PURCHASE?

A dram of Smoked Sacra Oud.

NAME THE SKILL OR TALENT YOU WOULD MOST LIKE TO HAVE.

I would like to play the fiddle.

WHAT IS YOUR PET PEEVE?

My latest one? Besides the misuse of the verb “to lie,” what is happening in films these days: when anyone cries their nose runs. Once you notice this you see it all the time. I cry a lot, and my nose never runs – unless I have a cold at the same time.

IF YOU COULD ONLY EVER LISTEN TO THREE PIECES OF MUSIC, WHAT WOULD THEY BE?

“Desolation Row” (Bob Dylan); “Rainy Night in Soho” (The Pogues); “Dido’s Lament” (Henry Purcell).

WHICH FAMOUS PERSON (LIVING OR DEAD) DO YOU THINK (OR HAVE YOU BEEN TOLD) YOU MOST RESEMBLE?

Maude Gonne.

WHAT ARE YOUR UBC HIGHLIGHTS?

Going with my grandfather, when I was a smallie, to find the oak trees he had planted, from acorns he’d brought from England after the First World War, all over the UBC endowment lands.



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