**Transcript Conversation with Ruben Nelson**

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# **Attendees**

Robert Ascah, Ruben Nelson

# **Transcript**

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Robert Ascah: Hello. My name is Bob Ascah and I'm hosting a series of conversations with well-known Albertans. In 2023 Albertans, face two, very different visions of the future. Yesterday, Alberta's voted and elected the United Conservative Party to a second term under the leader, Danielle Smith. In this series, I hope to engage viewers in a deep dive on three fundamental- all areas which require thoughtful consideration by the new provincial government. The first area is fiscal policy. In this field, we will canvas the structure of Alberta's finances and how Alberta can move away from the roller coaster fiscal effects of a boom-and-bust economy.

The second area is economic. Every time there is a bust in the economy, the inevitable response from government is to trot out the words, economic diversification, as if speaking these words will make this happen, and finally, the state of Alberta's political system, Many Albertans, feel distrustful of their government. This is a phenomenon. Of course not. You need to Albertans. Increasingly voters are turned off from politics, a pox on both parties and this is reflected in the lower turnout in the 2023 election, in spite of our record vote through advance, polls. Partisanship and polarization are increasingly common.

Yesterday's election results show a deeply divided province. Looking southward, the Trump phenomenon and eastward autocrats in other countries point to a resurgence of authoritarianism which threatens democratic institutions. So, what to do?

Joining me this afternoon, one day after the results of the provincial general election is Dr. Ruben Nelson. Ruben was born and raised in Calgary educated a Queen's University, Queens Theological College, and the United Theological College in Bangalore India,

He and his wife Heather have been married for 61 years. They live with their three cats at Lac des Arcs in the Alberta Rockies. They have two children. I first met Ruben around 1997 when he was instrumental in mobilizing a great number of Albertans in an enterprise called Capitalizing on Change. what struck me about Ruben was not so much his wisdom, but his energy in organizing and bringing together some of Alberta's organized intelligence in the form of people, of course, in government, industry and academia Not at all a small feat. This included bringing many prominent thinkers and futurists into Alberta.

Ruben has long been fascinated by the many ways we and our world are changing and what these evolutions mean for our future. He is one of a handful of Canadians who in the 60s and 70s pioneered serious, futures thinking, and its application to the practice of strategic foresight in Canada. He has used his insights in every corner and sector Canada to assist those willing to work with him make reliable sense of their adjacent futures. Ruben's research has led him to the view that if we are to sustain success in the unique conditions of the 21st century, we must develop new mental maps of where we are in history, where we are placed in history. Sadly. The now global sustainability industry is mostly stuck with the very mindset. That is the root cause of the wickednesses we are in. Over six decades Ruben has taught philosophy, comparative, religion, and advanced social theory. He has worked in the office of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to help formulate Canada's policy, and multiculturalism, and has been a leader in many associations on future studies. He's a Fellow of the World Academy of Art, and Science and the World, Business Economy, and of the Canadian. Association for the Club of Rome.

Robert Ascah: And presently. He is the executive director of Foresight Canada. Welcome Ruben.

Ruben Nelson: Thank you, Bob. I'm anxious to meet this saint that you've just characterized.

Robert Ascah: Okay, great. In framing the fiscal policy which as, you know, I've got a great passion about and opinions about facing Albert. The way I place Alberta is this, to use some of your terms industrial technological society, where we have great industrial projects such as the Oil sands, which are extracting a basic commodity, which is heavily in demand throughout the world, principally for transportation, but also for electricity.

It means that the province, like it was in the 1930s, is reliant on world, commodity prices, and trade and, and that produces such a great vulnerability, particularly for the province’s economy and how it flows through into the province’s revenue stream. With that background, do you have any it is my framing of the issue. Is it a proper one and is there anything else that comes to mind in your work? Looking from the past and going into the future.

Ruben Nelson: One of the things both as a person, as I look at institutional forms, that has struck me. And of course, it's not an idea unique to me, but I think it's more significant than we realize and that is there are relatively few organizations in the world of any kind, and by that, it may be a hospital, it may be a country, but I'm taking just any organized body, it may even be an empire. There are relatively few that are not =when push comes to shove – “future takers.” And being a future taker means that you need to seriously understand the situation you're in and with a good deal of humility come to terms with the forces that are shaping your future whether you like it or not. And it seems to me that Alberta, in those term, Alberta is not a humble place. We are not people.

We are extraordinarily male dominated. You know, as well as I do that. Alberta was not really a place where Europeans showed up until late in the 19th century. Yes in the 18th century, one or two folks put their foot across as Saskatchewan border and basically said That's enough, let's go home and it was another hundred years before anybody came in any numbers,…

So, that the folks who've come here and I think this is significant and a difference, for example, in in cultural differences between Quebec or Atlantic Canada, is the people who came here already, had been living in more in a modern techno-industrial culture which has a belief that it can conquer nature and control things. And therefore, that was the formative idea whereas when Cabot was fishing for the British in 1500 off Newfoundland or when the French came in the 17th century. There was a growing arrogance but fundamentally we were still pawns of nature. And that's not been true in Alberta. And so we've been settled and the culture has been determined by males

So this is a left brain culture. It's as if we don't do that, when you're at work, all you need is your left brain. Be rational, empirical and logical. Leave your emotions at home. Don't get personally involved. So as a person you don't bring yourself to work and you learn that. This is a business decision and has nothing to do with you so don't take it personally.

That mean then that you're dealing with people who have trained themselves to think that in some sense, they're in charge. And if it works well enough, they can succeed. And what we are learning whether it's the fires of this may or the things that you mentioned in terms of a roller coaster economy is that, in fact, in that sense, we're not in charge and Albertans, have yet to have political leaders who will help us win and it is a weaning process, help wean us off. The idea that we're in charge, learn a deeper humility and then ask the question- How would we behave, accordingly?

Robert Ascah: And, and that raises one of the historical junctures, I think. We go back to 1980 and the controversy over the National Energy Program, which was designed to create more Canadian champions and companies in an industry that had been heavily dominated by US capital, but also European capital that had financed the development of the conventional industry. And what happened? In 1982 it was not so much the national energy program, but also the collapse of oil prices which meant that the model that that Lougheed had developed the political model. You ran for the PC leadership in eighty-five or eighty six? The model was very much of kind of buying votes and that was paid for by the royalty revenues.

Lougheed wisely decided to sterilize some of that money in 76. But then they made this very pivotal decision just before a provincial election to reduce the flow of resource revenue into the Heritage Fund. And to take all the investment income out. as a way of paying, for a 30% increase in spending, And Lougheed was very determined in the early mid 70s to capture more of the rent which he did.

And this was also at a time of OPEC and the nationalization of oil companies and that sort of struggle that that went on. But as time evolved I think there was an understanding or a grudging acceptance within political circles and within the government itself, the bureaucracy as well, this wasn't such a bad thing. We will ride the roller coaster but we don't have to

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pay much in the way of taxes. So unpack that a little bit for me Ruben, I don't know if any of this has generated some thought but it just is a kind of a cultural change that carried in to the client era where you would brought in the neo-liberalism notions in the idea Government couldn't do anything right and that we became just more reliant on both the natural gas and the conventional oil, and it's been transformed as Robert Bhatia pointed out in an interview. Into bitumen. Now, that's the big money maker.

Walk me through that kind of cultural shift and what you think was going on at that time

Ruben Nelson: Well, let me, let me back up. Remember that, when you do futures work, you're looking beyond normal frames of reference and the general rule is for every year, you look out into the future. You need to look two years back. So that a good deal of the work is actually history. Let me just give you a quick Ruben's,… quick cut at some aspects of Western history. If Europeans didn't arrive here in any large numbers till 1880, 1890.up until the end of the 20s. This is a period when at least on the prairies of Canada including Alberta, life is pretty tough. Both, man and women. You had to be pretty hardy - whether you were home sitting here or even if you were in Calgary or Edmonton, what was called a town? I mean, folks in Toronto, who in the sixties thought that we had wooden sidewalks, we're not far off the mark. They were a few decades out of date. But back then, so we grew up with a culture that was hard physical work for men and women. That and then we hit the 30s. when people were out of work again, hard, physical work. And then we hit the Second World War. And we came out of that as people who in a sense were together, but we and we were used to not having a whole lot.

Ruben Nelson: And you, if you remember, Alberta in the, in the 50s, if any of us hadn't been smart enough to rent an old barn in the country, you could have filled it with handmade wooden furniture that today you could sell for enough to retire on because we literally scrapped millions of kitchen and cabinets and other tables and other things for chrome.

If you remember that, in the 50s because this was going to be modern,…So that there's been a hunger here as well. So you get a certain kind of self-reliance and we'll make do, as well as a sense of we're able to do it and we're going to advance as best we can. So that's the foundation that Lougheed inherits and as long as the price of oil is reasonable, and the NEP isn't around, When the gusher flows, he has to create the Heritage Trust fund because he can't spend it all fast enough.

So, in a sense, there's no virtue on his part other than enough sense, that we better put some of this in the bank. And then there's just a double whammy of the OPEC oil crisis and the National Energy Project. And quite understandably people view this is in many ways. The first really deep scarring shock to the Alberta psyche since the 30s except damn few people who were, you know, in charge, they had searing memories of the 30s in a positive way that they could learn from it. They might have been children and simply seen the stress on their parents. and so, Lougheed was tempted to and fell. As you point out fell to the temptation. He wants to win the election of 82 and spending money is one way, historically, he didn't invent this, this is a perfectly normal thing.

00:20:00 human beings to do probably goes back to the ancient Incas and Egyptians. So Lougheed did not in my memory, did not make it absolutely clear that this was an emergency situation and a one-off. He didn't protect himself enough. That if things then got better, you could change the model.

And what has happened is that we've become a province that the norm, the norm is people say we're fiscally conservative and socially progressive, which doesn't mean hard. Can't remember the PC party, but it just means that's that normal, dominant. And can it work- except we're not fiscally conservative? What we are is tax averse. And you see that first bill that Danielle Smith is going to bring into the house to bind the way.

California is bound that you have to have a referendum to raise taxes and so what we've got ourselves into is you say, is this roller coaster because you've got had people who were experienced, had enough experience of what hardship does. That they want to avoid it. and that's turned into in a funny kind of way turning our backs on not each other as immediate neighbors but on each other in the broader sense of the culture. That we in Alberta, if you live down near Coutts, frankly you don't think a whole lot about the people in Hey River, let alone Grand Prairie. The people in Brunswick are just out of sight,…out of mind. Entirely. And so, yes, there's a certain sympathy for people in Central Canada and we live closer to where you are with the fires. But frankly, unless it's a smoky day down here, it's not given a lot of thought. So we've become a province in which the doctor in, it has become “look out for yourself.” Look out for your family. And if you can socialize costs and privatize benefits. And of course,…that's what the oil industry is doing, it's what it's whatever industry has learned to do. Even during the Washington Consensus, and the Chicago School folks were smart enough to say, if we can get the public to share part of our costs, a good part, ideally whether for a battery plant or for carbon capture and storage. As long as we get the profits. from the capital costs that are being largely covered by the public sector. Everyone. And so we've got a province that thinks it's conservative and its mindset. And you hear that all the time from Chambers of Commerce from business people, from conservative minded, politicians. There's not much in the way if Alberta went into therapy. If we had therapist who was any good, he or she would help us face the fact that, by and large, we have become systematically dishonest about who we are and what we value. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our actual behavior is no longer congruent.

Robert Ascah: Well one of the one of the chapters I was reading in the *Blue Storm* book that came out edited by Duane Bratt and colleagues. Had to do about the archetypes that we have - the Alberta Mavericks and so on and it as you describe the earliest pioneers coming here. It was very, very grim. And as you say, it was manual labor. There I'm certain there were elements of neighbor's helping neighbors in need, but it was really a struggle for families homesteading and their relationship with the CPR, with the land development companies, and the government.

But it does invite the issue that people raise about Americanization. Of the culture of Alberta and the importance of American capital for the energy industry, but there was a lot of migration from the United States.

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Robert Ascah: Nebraska and Montana of North Dakota.

Ruben Nelson: Yeah, a third of the people who settled the prairies between 1880 and 1913, a third of the three million who came were American. My mother born in the US. A lot of the establishment you know, people who've been here a while on the Canadian prairies, we look south and we literally see cousins. And whereas from Ontario Quebec, ff you look south, you see competitors, you also see cousins because there's been lots of truck and trade for hundreds of years that way but we've there they fought wars with each other. We burn the White House. They came and burned for York. So we're here on the western side of North America. We have a common grievance about the government back there. Whether back there is Washington or Ottawa because “back there” owns a lot of the land and has called a lot of the shots. And so it means certainly Alberta south of the Battleford River is the most Americanized part of Canada. Just in terms of when I went to school, the only new kids in my class were the oil kids. That every spring, some of them left because their fathers had done their time in Calgary, and we're now headed off to Oklahoma City or Dallas or wherever they were headed next. And the new kids were always the oil kids. Other than that class was the same class that had been there for grade four. And so we just got used to having American oil kids as as part of the culture.

Robert Ascah: So turning now Ruben to the economy. And when I chatted with Todd Hirsch, I raised the idea about how significant on a terms of trade basis, the oil sector is that if you look at it from the amount of exports that we generate to pay for imports because so much of our products whether they're on grocery shelves or in retail stores, clothing stores are all imported. So the population that government and the economic actors have to find a source of income. And that's generally been the oil and gas. But what worries me is again, the long term future of the economy, in a carbon constrained world. And as a futurist, what is your perspective on the role of oil going into 2050?

Ruben Nelson: Well, I'm a strange way - I'm among a really small minority of people. I don't cheer. What is now official doctrine? And that is we have to decarbonize as quickly as we can because of climate change. All of that true. Except it won't work.

In other words,…we were being sold a bill of goods and I say this not as a shill for the oil companies but just as somebody who is in routine contact with some of the best researchers around the world, which is no virtue on my part. It's just what good futurists do. And the conversation in the last 15 years has increased in, in this the number of people in the conversation, the quality of research behind it and it's quite clear in my view. At least the research I've come to trust says, there isn't a ghost of a chance that what we're being sold as a path to a green economy -is actually going to work.

That that it's blind to the degree to which our prosperity has been based on high carbon energy. It's also blind to the amount of materials that you need. In other words, moving at, you know, to electric vehicles and electric everything else in the hope, we can keep all the rest of it, is an illusion.

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Ruben Nelson: Because it also destroys the environment. So we're in a position as a modern technical industrial culture. This is my view. That it's false to say what the oil companies are saying that we can keep producing oil and gas, will get the society to pay for carbon capture and storage and other stuff. But it's going to be a technological salvation and then we can keep on with our life that's one version. The other version is the environmentalist version which the federal government has bought into and that is, we'll go green and then we can keep everything it is- what I've come to the view is- If we continue to grow and remember that economic growth was promised by every each of the 14 political parties, in the last election, there were 14 different parties from common to the radical,… right? They all in one way or another promised us that there would be no great disruption to our modern way of life. And in order to do that, we do have to have growth. And in order to do that, we have to continue to consume the planet in which case we die of biophysical degradation. Well, that's one way or…

You can say, well it's not growth. Except we are now so hooked on growth and it's worked into our culture and our minds in so many ways. That it - is literally the case. That without growth, both for psychological and monetary reasons, the culture collapses. So within a modern framework, the only choices we have are, which way do you want to face? Societal collapse. You can face it with growth or without growth, but those are the only two options and in either case you get societal collapse. And the thing, that if you want to get out of that trap, you have to learn to question the modern frame of reference. Well, at this point, not just in Canada, but around the world. There is no serious investment in even understanding that - little questioning it. There's no group of professionals bigger than a pull- up department and as you know for us, we departments are usually about six people at best in today's universities, where economics might have 30. So they're even the size of an decent economics department- let alone the 250 professionals, the Perimeter Institute- things you need to do theoretical physics. And they're not looking at the whole of reality. They're just doing theoretical physics and they think they need 250 professionals with the support system of 750 to a thousand people on their payroll.

Well, as I say there, there's no place in the world now with six people on their payroll. To look at the issue in a serious way of - is modernity itself. A sustainable way to live. And the last election that we just finished, there was no thought, zero given by any political party that that we cannot take for granted, that modernity is here essentially forever and ever. Amen. And my view is it will not last the rest of this century.

That doesn't mean.

Robert Ascah: So when we talk about developing new mental maps, how do we go about that?

Ruben Nelson: Well, others have pointed out, but I agree with them, that that what Trudeau is doing is still locking us into a modern car economy. Okay so… if you're going - if the fundamental question is we have to learn to wean ourselves not just off automobiles and high carbon fuels, we have to wean ourselves off the very way we have come to see ourselves and reality as modern men and women. And most people in a vague sense, might know they’re modern, but if in order to have supper tonight, they had to write even a five-page essay on it or give a seven minute talk. Most of them would go hungry. They're not bad people. It's just it's not, not a conversation that's normal. And so my strategy is a strategy of reaching out into the future to do something that most people won't understand is actually helping to set us up for long-term success, you know, so I want to do it in a way that doesn't alarm people now.

So anybody who's listening to this,…

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who's already alarmed for God's sake. Turn it off. Go have, you know, a walk in the sunshine and pretend it didn't happen and you'll be better off and so will all of us. So, let me just give an example. We came out of the Second World War that as a culture we knew how to do hands-on operational work. So operational planning and operational work is what most organizations knew how to do. During the war it became clear in a way that the military is known about it for off and on for thousands of years. But coming out of the Second World War because it was both global and so documented we really got it. That other things being equal, if the rough size of the armies and the armaments are equal, folks would better strategies than others won.

And so we came from the war, saying, we not only have to do operations, we have to do strategy. And we invented management. We forget that there's no management. Before, I mean management has talked about in 1900, isn't what we call management today. Management is simply the arrangement of work. It's operational planning. And so management in the C-suite today, which doesn't do any? I mean, all they do is think they do nothing with their hands. They do nothing with their right. This is a left brain activity that shows itself in terms of decisions for boards and money gets spent and things get to happen. But the c-suite doesn't in a sense, do anything? And we learned that that's really important work. And Pierre Trudeau came to power in 1968, Peter Lougheed in 71, and they were the first two major politicians in Canada and therefore, the first people who had a wide influence on their jurisdictions. And they both understood that thinking strategically and policy work. Needed to happen. Well, when they inherited Trudeau the federal public service and Lougheed the provincial public service. There's nobody in any of those public services with policy in their job.

There's no assistant deputy ministers or policy, there's no policy shops and Lougheed and Trudeau are committed to introducing policy to their governments because they know if they can't do policy work and they only work operationally that they're going to be overrun, it's now so complex. What they'll do is create incoherence and that policy is designed to avoid operational incoherence, because you have the same policy across a broad. And Pierre Trudeau looked around and said, There isn't one policy think tank in Canada, in 1968, not one. And he invited Ronald Richie, who was executive vice president for Imperial Oil.

“you're going to do this for me. And Imperial is going to pay for it if you have to travel and you know but I want you to travel in the US and in Europe because those are - that's the world that we understood at the time. It wasn't yet important as a source of ideas.

“Want you to travel there and visit their think tanks and invent Canada's first policy shop.” And he reported Ron Ritchie reported back to the PM and this was done before the Prime Minister, when he was elected leader. But before the election of 68 So this is one of the administrative things he actually did and…

Ron. Richie came back two years later in the late spring of 1970. And gave a report to the Prime Minister. And the Prime Minister gave it to Michael Pitfield. who later, who was a dear friend and a high confidant and so he gave it to them. To the most trusted person that he knew in the federal public service in his Prime Minister's office and Michael gave it to me and said “Sorry the Government of Canada to see this report.

And Michael's Butch… which is how he knew me. “Read this thing and write me a briefing note.”

Well, I didn't know how to write a briefing note, I only been in town a couple of months but long enough that Michael and I had fallen into good conversations and he thought I might have something interesting. And I basically said this work is extraordinarily important because it's at a whole new level of generality. And that's what needs to be understood about it. Except what Ron has done is give you a better model that was invented in the 1930s.

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Ruben Nelson: And it's not good enough for Canada. And if you implement this model, you'll create something that will officially succeed because people are beginning to be open to the need for this. So the press and the globe, and others will like it. Funders will like it, it will officially succeed and redeem to be wonderful. It will make almost no practical contribution to Canada. And that was the Institute for Research on Public Policy. And on broadly,…unfortunately, I've been right. IRPP, there's nothing you can point to in Canada. That's decisive about Canada's development, but Trudeau had an instinct that his public servants, ff they were going to do policy needed a safe place outside the public service where they could learn to do policy and bring that back because within the public service. It was an environment that this would not be valued. So now we're in the same position. We need to lift up a whole new level of generality to do strategic foresight. Strategic foresight is not just better strategic planning. In the same way strategic planning isn't just better operational planning. Operational planning strategic planning, and strategic foresight are at three fundamentally different levels of generality, and most people don't understand that. And so,

what we don't have in Canada is literally any developed competence to do strategic foresight.

So what might the government do? What might Danielle do if she wants to do something that doesn't alarm. Take Back Alberta. She could quietly turn the Banff Center into the world's foremost research Center for research and practice, in strategic foresight. Which most people in Alberta would think is a waste of time and money, but it means also they ignore it because they'd get over it because they got other things to do than worry about the Banff Center. They don't worry about that, most of what it does now is irrelevant. So, if it's still going to be irrelevant, who cares,

But we need in Alberta and in Canada. A place to develop the capacity, to do a new form of thinking about past, present, and future in new frames of reference to begin to. Then do this work, in a way that we can hone it down in the same way. Your background is such that, that I'm sure you've been in sessions where people say, What would your policy advice be and you've all forget and somebody in the room would say, But how do we implement that tomorrow? And if you go nuts…because they think that if you can't implement a policy immediately, it's bad policy. When what it shows is the person asking the question is ignorant of what the nature of policy is and they're simply danger, they shouldn't have been invited to the meeting because it takes a while to digest policy into your system and… figure out what you're going to do with it. And if you don't understand it, it's like having somebody close to you die. And somebody says, “what are you going to do without them?” The honest answer is “Who the hell knows? I don't know, it's just happened. I'm gonna have to learn with this for a while and what it means operationally in my life.I haven't got a sweet. It will mean something. but it may take months and even years to work through the implications.”

And we're in a situation, historically that Is going to take months and even years to work through the implications because we should not be funding an automobile based culture which means electric vehicles should go. Which it means that we need to think far wider and deeper about the challenges we're in and nobody in Canada is doing it in a way that's at all serious. and in a way that's coherent enough that if, if there was a group of people who were serious about it, that you could actually advise them,

Robert Ascah: Now one of the things that I I know about Danielle Smith is her tendency to be a bit of a disruptor and the whole question about policy stability, which is very important for the business community. But at the same time, I just wonder whether Trump is the same sort of individual in the sense of wanting to disrupt systems and challenging. The status quo, which I think we both agree, is probably a in a mess and so you don't keep doing the same thing using the same systems and policies and procedures. but,

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what I'm worried about it with Ms. Smith, is the question of ultimately separating from the rest of Canada- we talked earlier in the conversation about the Americanization of Alberta clearly, the most American called Americanized culture in the country, Smith was mistaken about the powers of Premier, likening it to governor. And so on it, this business of amnesty, So, somewhere we have a great uncertainty, and there's been a lot of writing about it, Alan Greenspan about the Age of Uncertainty and so on. And many thinkers. Being perplexed.Where all this ends. And we're in a very unique point in global history where the communications is global and we can find out what's going on in Somalia, with our smartphone very easily.

So, this notion of planning I think has been challenged or discredited- that master plans just don't work because systems are so complex now. and plus the fact that people have their own agendas, So, let's just

think about, what the challenge is to me, at least, is that we live in a capitalist system. Where making money is a virtue. Where everything can be treated as a tradable commodity, and there's a wonderful book by Michael's Sandel. You've probably read it. Mom. What money? And Mark Carney's *Values* is like that too..

They don't know the value of anything, they know the price of everything. So, so whither capitalism globally. Ruben?

Ruben Nelson: As you know, it's become a minor industry. Well, in your cap…because there's all kinds of different bodies. Marxists are feeling their oats because they're saying we always knew it and so, Neo Marxism is doing well. And there must be a dozen bodies around the world who are trying to rethink to some extent economics and capitalism. My issue, with all of that is it's still within the frame. That our last election there were 14 parties, basically saying our future is fundamentally modern. Now, some of them might say we want a new kind of capitalism. But they're still in a modern frame. And so, I want to go back to your comment about Donald Trump and others that there are people who kind of intuitively get it. That that we do need to shake up the systems in a really serious way that we've got But you see if actually took that idea, seriously, let me let's just for the moment you and I agree and any

Carney Sendal about 49body who's listening to this agree. What we've done in effect? Is by agreeing to be oblivious. To the systems that were actually in. We have left to people who want to shake up systems for their own good and in service of their own ego, You end up with the Daniel Smith, son, Donald Trump's and Erdogan in Turkey and

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Prime Minister of Hungary, and Johnson who was prime minister in England. I mean, you end up with people who are thoroughly destructive. Yes, they're perfectly willing to shake things up but in a sense to no good in- they don't have the capacity, they don't have the integrity. They don't even have the common good in mind. But we who fathom that and quite rightly bemoan it, haven't been bright enough to say and in a clear enough voice We need institutions that care for us at a deeper human level, to think these things true, on behalf of all of us, so that we can have a more radical middle. So that we can have a centrist movement of people who are upset at, what's happening to them, to their towns, to their grandchildren, you go through the list. In that sense the elites, there's something to the people who talk about the elites in Canada and how much they've been good at feathering their own nests while not necessarily caring for those for whom they have formal responsibilities. I think there's a lot of truth in that and I say that as one who has lived his life, much of it with those folks, I'm not part of it, not well healed enough, but I have been accepted by them and had access to them. But the interesting thing is we thought that better policy work would shatter the frameworks except as you and I both know policy work doesn't ever ask the questions. What are the frames of reference that we're taking for granted?

And if policy people do that, they might move one step beyond where they are now. But having moved out one step, they say “We've done it.” Whether it's like, people say, think outside the box. Notice that that's from that singular. And people say :Think outside the boxes” and then I have to ask “Well, how many are there?” They're like Russian nested dolls. How many move -we have to make to get out? And what I talk about is reaching what I call escape velocity- from modernity just like reaching escape velocity from the gravity of Earth. If you're trying to get to the moon and you don't reach escape velocity, gravity will bring you back through the atmosphere and kill you in the process.

Ruben Nelson: And we don't have anybody in Canada who is serious about how would you help a whole society? That doesn't even understand the depth to which it is modern. Come to terms of the fact, it has no future as a modern culture.

And how would you help them understand that in a way that doesn't terrify them and see that as an adventure. So we could replace the Alberta Advantage, which is about low taxes and money in your pocket, to the Alberta Adventure. Alberta could earn a reputation. I mean we do have enough mavericks and things, we have the possibility of earning a global reputation of becoming the most extraordinary place in the world that is taking this work seriously and that people would fly here from all over the world and we would say, “If you're from Nigeria and can't afford it, of course, we'll help you. If you're from China and can't afford it.” Of course, we're going to charge you and talk dollars.

There, this will turn into a multi-billion dollar global consulting work. In the same way policy work is, is hundreds of millions of dollars. How many hundreds of billions of dollars globally? Alberta had the opportunity to own this work in 1966 Preston Manning talk his daddy who was premier into creating the first futures think tank in Canadian history run by Lorne Downey as the Human Resources Research Council. Lorne had 10 guys working for him who were among Canada's most extraordinary futurists. They did the first formal futures project in Canadian history and among other things it was published in 68 and it predicted to demise of the Socred dynasty because they could see that Alberta was quivering on the edge of a culture change and that the Socreds didn't get it. And Peter Lougheed came to power as was predicted. And said to himself. “My God these guys are good.”

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Ruben Nelson: We hope they're extraordinary but he also said, I

Carney Sendalla any premier quite responsibly would say, “but are they my guys? I didn't appoint them. They were appointed by the previous government.” And one of the first administrative things Peter did, as you know, came to power, in the fall he phoned Lorne Downey and said, “This is just a heads up. I am not going to go to the bother or passing legislation to obliterate your body, but your budget next year will be a dollar. And if you can raise enough money to keep it going, good on you, I'll support you. If you can't do that, plan to wind down now.” But Peter had no idea. That he had a leg up on. What would become a global multi-billion-dollar franchise?

Robert Ascah: Very, very interesting Ruben. One of the pivotal principles undergoing our political system of course is the rule of law. And the rule of law was very instrumental in fostering capitalism, globalism and world trade system. Now China is a country which is moving more to an authoritarian type of state and yet one wonders whether their capacity to mobilize resources and get buildings built and so on is perhaps a better model of going into the future. Now that of course was controversial, and Justin Trudeau was slapped back. But we, we are creatures of our heritage and our heritage's liberal democracies. There's an interesting book by Seth Klein -Naomi Klein's brother *A Just War* about creating and mobilizing federal government, provincial. Almost a state of emergency to address climate change. And that would, if you had extraordinary powers, then you could basically say, well, electric vehicles- more cars is not the solution. And we're going to go in a different area, we're going to secure, for example, the water supply, we're going to secure the air supply.

We're going to reduce emissions in a very structured way. But again, we're in an open economy as economists, remind us. So, again, what, to do, what is there to do? I move from being the kind of an optimist to a great, pessimist along the lines of collapse of civilizations. And, and so just speak a little bit about the perils in both kind of a 50,000 foot state planning versus communities getting their act together and creating local products and creating local markets.

Ruben Nelson: Well, let's play with that. I think the issue you're raising is absolutely critical and one of the things that gets us into trouble is that we think that given our education and backgrounds are, but as modern men and women, we tend to think in binary terms. Whereas the Chinese and the ancient Hebrews. If those of us who call ourselves Christians actually had spent more time not reading the Old Testament in English, but understanding the thought patterns in Hebrew behind English, which is a whole different story. We would find that that Hebrew patterns of thought and Chinese patterns of thought are remarkably similar. Which suggests that it's not about Eastern vs. Western.

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Ruben Nelson: It's about a time shift. That if you go back, four or five thousand years, you find lots of people who are thinking in relational terms. And in small group terms. Now, China ends up relationally and bit by bit, it becomes an empire thinks large group so it's an interesting example of relational thinking and an empire. Indigenous people are relational thinking and small groups. And then they have as you know, with the Blackfoot Confederacy and others agreements among them in a way to keep the peace.

And they're also smart enough, although that Mendel and his genetics are in the future. But they've also paid attention enough that for reasons. They may not quite understand in our sense scientifically but it's not good to marry too many first cousins so you get brides from a neighboring group and all good.

Ruben Nelson: So I mean in that sense we're remarkably smart and I take seriously the challenge that you've put out. So here's a response, an idea that I have floated among deputy ministers, some cabinet ministers in Alberta. There's a list as long as your arm of ideas that have been rejected by Prime Ministers, premiers you know and other senior people -which, you know in a funny way, where is a badge of pride. But one of them is, let's assume that the price of oil is at least at the 75 dollar range which keeps us out of trouble keeps, at least floating in Alberta, maybe even 80 bucks a barrel, maybe even 85 so that we've got some extra money.

So we're going to appoint you and you get to look around for a female and the two of you have to then, look around for people who are indigenous male and female and the four of you are going to be a group and we're going to give you a hundred billion dollars. To spend over 10 years. Which means that you've got 10 billion. I a hundred million. No, we're going to do more. We're going to give you a billion dollars, so you got a hundred million a year and you're going to be able to give it away in 10 million dollar tranches.

Now, 10 million, you know isn't a lot today given inflation but it'll still buy you something rather than nothing and we're going to set up not a competition in that competitive sense. But you're going to open a competitive bidding for towns in Alberta that are 15,000 people or smaller. Because we're going to learn to practice this stuff at a scale where you can almost wrap your arms around people. I'm trying to do Calgary at one point or Edmonton at a million is just Nutsville.

But to do Clarsholm, to do Slave Lake to do, Bonnieville lots of interesting towns and we're going to say in order to submit an application for this because the deal is you'll get 10 million a year for 10 years. And it has to be spent on a program that helps you start the transition from being an unconscious modern community that only aspires to being a better unconscious, modern community. So you're both better modern but also you're no more conscious than you were. And notice that in the last election, there was no thought offered by anybody. That actually becoming conscious of the world we're in might actually be a good idea. Neither left, nor right, is willing to float, that idea in public.

Where we figured out that if you're going to change a system you're in, you have to become conscious of it. And the way that system is in you, And so would work out, but would, literally we'd say that we're going to have10 places in Alberta, each of which is going to try to do this, and they can be done in very different ways. That they can be done on different assumptions.

Ruben Nelson: Each will abide by the rule of law, but you're, you know enough about history that there's nothing in the rule of law per se that advantages capitalism. You could also have a culture with the rule of law that isn't capitalistic. The law is simply because the laws in that sense are simply the agreements that people have arrived at and what is good, true and beautiful.So the fact that that we in the modern world, have used the rule of law to advance capitalism is simply in that sense, historic accident. There's nothing inherent in there. I mean, you can't do capitalism without the rule of law because that just looks like, you know, you've got scoundrels which you have but with the rule of law, they don't look like scoundrels and so you let them get away with it.

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Ruben Nelson: So, without the rule of law, capitalism needs the rule of law, the rule of law does not need capitalism. Doesn't mean the only alternative is what we think of historically, is socialism. And so we're going to invite Albertans to put their thinking caps on and to work through some of this to go at it. And one of these places may decide to try master planning you and I might agree would be a mistake…

But let's try it out to see how far they can get, what we can learn. Some other place might decide to break up people into groups of 150 in their community of 15,000 and have them work as communities and do that taking the Dunbar number. Seriously, there's a sense in which it's not that. I don't care as long as thought goes into it, but literally we don't know enough about changing whole complex systems to know how to go about it. And so, one of the things we should say is what we face in the 21st century is having to change whole complex systems and wholesale ways. And to understand, they're not complicated, they're complex.

And that the rules for complicated systems in the rule for complex systems are utterly different rules and since nobody on the planet knows enough about how you do that at scale and all this would be in terms of a firm back to your bank herself. Whereas a firm is doing proof of concept it's going to grow enough to show that it can be scaled. This is simply using small groups, to literally see how far we can get to do enough learning because ultimately, as you know, Tokyo already has what 30 million people in it. I don't know how that we even think about that- let alone Calgary or Toronto. But what I'm saying is we were serious about it. That what the objective is to take seriously that we are in the process of learning to outgrow our own formation as modern men and women. And therefore, modern husbands, modern bosses, modern workers, modern Xs, whatever those X's are.

Ruben Nelson: Doesn't mean we're inherently bad people, It just means that any baby born literally any baby born that does not die either in birth or shortened thereafter from. Neglect is born into a going a culture that's a going concern with people who care for them that speak a given language in a given culture. That's already established and nobody says to the baby. I'm sorry kid you're born into this particular form of culture at this particular time of history and we're going to pretend with you that this is the right way to be human.

Robert Ascah:. So if you've got a provincial government that initiates, these pilot projects -- I know they're that's probably not a good name for it. But what are, what are we looking for? How do we measure the outcomes of this experiment? Are we looking at pure water, healthier communities, less domestic violence? Is this an economy of well-being, in other words, we're beginning to explore.

Ruben Nelson: Yeah it would. This is about whole systems thinking that are complex and therefore dynamic The thinking is integral, which means that nothing gets left out. So anybody who wants to talk about externalities, you give them a bar of soap and say, every time you say that word wash your mouth out with soap, There are no externalities in a complex, living system. And so, I mean, yes, you're quite right. There's lots of stuff. We already know about the world. We need to move. Gravity will still be there. Put it this way.,If gravity weakens to the point, that it doesn't hold us on this planet, every other issue is moot. And so people say there are no facts about the future…

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Ruben Nelson: which may be true as a narrowing, empirical statement, But it's really a narrow modern statement to try to anchor us into hard data, where in fact, if in fact, we don't already know a good deal about the future, then we're not taking human life seriously. We know there will be gravity, we know, they'll be babies. We know that those babies will have plastic brains, and that their nutrition before the woman gets pregnant matters to the child. We know a ton of stuff already. And we also know that our desire to measure everything is a mistake. So we're going to limit the kinds of things we measure. And we're also going to widen the sensor of measurement. I forget.

Robert Ascah: But it isn't how we know based on objective measures.

Ruben Nelson: No, object. It's one of the things that we're going to learn to wash our mouth out with soap, that object differentiation between, does that have the division of the world into some things are objective? And everything else is subjective, is a modern fantasy that no pre-modern culture understands or plays with. This is literally a modern invention and you can see it emerged … The CBC did a 15-part series on the emergence of the concepts of public and private. We could invite him to do another series and they basically say you don't, you don't get private space until you also get public space. That before the private individual is invented, there's no such thing as the public. Whereas we tend to think that Romans had public space… but no individuals. And this series -did you know, by the time you're finished, listening to all of them, realize that that's a mistake that public and private go together. If you want one, you get the other. And objective and subjective. Go together. If you want one, you get the other and you don't have to have either. If in fact, you just set that aside and ask the question as a genuinely open question, How many other ways are there thinking of some of the same kinds of phenomenon that we point to other than in those terms? And in that case, you'll find some people, typically, in other languages often in indigenous languages but not only that putting their hand up and say, Well, I can tell you how the ancient Hebrews did it, we who are Jewish today do not experience the world in the same way as ancient Hebrews did In spite of the ultra-Orthodox people saying we are true to the ancient Hebrews. Bullshit. That there are true to what having built been filtered. Through 2000 years of Western history, and unfortunately, we are what we know about ourselves is we are so plastic that we are far more products of history than we understand. and understanding that fact, then allows us to think well if we're products of history, we have actually more room for freedom. To, in a sense, change the production line.

If what a culture is a culture is a production line for certain kinds of persons -certain understandings of economics of families, of making love, of giving birth. falling I love. But being educated, being obedient being disrespectful, being a maverick, that all of that is up for grabs. If we think widely enough and historically enough and that's what I'm trying to get to by saying, modernity itself is up for grabs. We now understand that if you go back a thousand years, nobody on the planet is modern, and there's almost nothing on the planet, that's even about the roots of modernity.

And but there's things in the 10th century in what we think of as now as broadly Western and central Europe that are beginning to show up, particularly in art and architecture and poetry and music. Not an accident, the musician. We know that artists are often people who sense things and

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are ahead of a culture. They give the first articulation to a set of ideas. And so if next time, you're in Ottawa, I invite you to go to the National Gallery because the National Gallery in Ottawa has one of the world's best collections of orthern European art. And it starts about 1300. There's some before that, but their collections that's old enough to get you into it. And it works through historically as you work through the rooms and it brought you out into a post-modern art as if what's beyond. what we think of as modern art into postmodern art,

And the Group of Seven would be and their abstraction would be a borderline. They're not they're not as far out as postmodern art…but nor are they still classically modern people and you see that in some 19th century art but mostly in some 20th century art. And if you walk through it and pay attention, you can literally see a modern imagination forming. And you could take classes of kids in grade eight, kids in Grade 12, for sure, university students, graduate students. It would be interesting to take different sets of people through and then get them together in the cafeteria and say, “We'll buy you whatever you want at no cost. But the prices you got to be here and talk for the next hour to each other in small groups, as well as a whole group to talk about what you've just seen.” And what is it? That's emerging as the heart of modernity.

How would you know, modernity having watched a modern imagination appear in that art?

Robert Ascah: And so reason, of course, was part of that development. In the coming out of the so-called Dark Ages. And letting go of, I guess the subjective. The more mystical properties of imaginations and so on. And I'm getting a sense from you Ruben that that you are ultimately an optimist -Am I right in that in in the sense that it is the use of the imagination? That is so powerful. and that I think reason and John Ralston, Saul talks about the unconscious civilization and you know his book about Voltaire's Bastarda said that the damage that reason has wrought. Is that a takeaway? Can I take that to the bank?

Ruben Nelson: Well, I want to avoid the language of optimism and pessimism because I don't find the language of optimism to be robust enough to withstand the kind of pain that we're in for. I think I may be wrong in my judgment…but I'm among those who think that even by the time we have the next election in Alberta given that that should 2027. Let's assume that UCP hangs together as a political party, long enough that we may have a new premier by that time or even several at the present rate. but if the next elections 2027 my judgment today would be and I couldn't spell it out exactly as to the details of what I mean. But in the same way that 2023 is a more emotionally stressed world than 2019 or 2015 or 2012 before that if you look at Alberta elections

So with every passing election, the world of Alberta has become increasingly stressed in just for normal living people. By 2027 that will have increased noticeably and so I find that most people's optimism it's like water on the deck after a bit of a summer rain, but when the sun comes out, if it's hot enough, give it 20 minutes, you can't even see any water on the day. It's just you evaporated and optimism tends to evaporate in the face of really serious hardship.

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Ruben Nelson: I find the language of hope and hopefulness and hopelessness speak to me more in the sense of are there, reasons to still get up. Clean up, suit up, and show up. And I want to say yes even in the face of extraordinary difficulty, and you see that in extreme cases in the work of Viktor Frankl and others who wrote about the German concentration camps that the people who survived it tended to be, people that, even as enslaved workers, after hours of working in some munitions plant could nudge, each other walking back to Dachau or whatever. Nudged each other to say, Look at the sunset..to say there is beauty of the world and to not let what's happening to them as physical beings, and what's happening to them because of the Nazi doctrine corrupt their souls to say, There's part of me, you cannot own that I am strong enough. You'll never own all of me. And I remember in 1984,… the most penetrating thing that Orwell saw is that nobody got to die. In 1984 until they acknowledged that they love Big Brother, you could not die as a martyr. They kept you alive until they broke you. Extraordinary insight.

Ruben Nelson: And I for me, then what I want encourage people to do is find some way to experience life here and now as full of enough grace, and forgiveness, and beauty. In whatever traditions make sense to them, which may or may not be what we think of as a religious tradition or a spiritual tradition, whatever. But that is strong enough that they have grounds for what I call post to spare hope. Because despair in the sense of my God, we're trapped and there's no way out of this and we've been wasting time and money. And we're now in worship pursuing, these fantasies that we've had, we've actually wasted time and money and we're shaped them than we needed to be.

That that realization is I've been through that, that's decades ago, for me. I don't mean that is virtue. I just mean that the earlier you did it the easier it is for you. Because the longer you wait in a sense, the more that you see of your life is locked into it. On the other hand, I've lived with the burden of knowing that I live in a culture that doesn't see what I see and doesn't want to see. That doesn't have so that they're not many people as clients who really want to say we're hiring you Ruben to teach you the best that we know. As opposed to just give it once over lightly on the top.

Robert Ascah: I think that's a wonderful way to wind up this conversation and the sense of also the grace and the beauty that that we experience and the requirement to find that beauty on it, on a daily basis. We've covered enormous canvas of human history and Alberta history. I always find our discussions. Very interesting and fruitful.

Robert Ascah: And I hope our listeners will enjoy the conversation as well. So, we'll see how many hits get up on YouTube in the next week or so