

CANADIAN POLITICIANS FIDDLE AS THE WORLD FLATTENS



DAVID ZUSSMAN

In Thomas Friedman's latest book, *The World is Flat*, he offers an interesting apology to readers for his failure to identify one of the most important global developments taking place in the past 10 years. With his attention turned toward understanding the impact of Sept. 11, 2001, on Americans, he admits to having missed the latest era of globalization that is transforming the world in a most radical way.

Globalization 3, as he calls it, is "shrinking the world from a small size to a size tiny (sic) and flattening the playing field at the same time."

Just what he means by claiming "the world is now flat" is so important an observation for Canada and Canadians that it deserves to suspend, for a brief moment, our ongoing interest in Belinda Stronach, the Gomery inquiry, and the consequences of last Thursday's House of Commons vote.

In essence, Mr. Friedman's argument outlines three converging forces

currently driving us to live and compete on a global, Internet-enabled "playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration — the sharing of knowledge and work — in real time, without regard to geography, distance, or, in the near future, even language."

This complex observation recognizes that, around 2000, these forces began to build a momentum of their own. The first of these forces was the sudden opening up of the world as a result of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the appearance of Netscape as the first general-use browser, changes in workflow efficiencies, the emergence of job outsourcing and supply-chain management, and the development of myriad high-speed, miniaturized gadgets such as BlackBerrys and cellphones.

In addition to technological advances, the second thing fuelling this convergence has been the emergence of a new generation of workplace managers, innovators and CEOs with new business practices who, by assuming more management responsibilities, began to replace the traditional command-and-control management style of earlier generations with a more collaborative approach. In short, explains Carly Fiorina, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, "we have gone from a vertical chain of command for value creation to a much more horizontal chain of command

for value creation."

Finally, the third convergent force has been the sudden availability of a large amount of well-educated talent in a number of countries around the world. Not only did the demise of the Soviet Union create markets for new products and services, it also freed up millions of ambitious and motivated workers who joined Chinese and Indian workers in the search for challenging and rewarding employment. In all, more than three billion potential workers arrived on the scene at the same time as technology was flattening the world.

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The net effect has been the emergence of a highly skilled, motivated, and relatively inexpensive work force competing for the new collaborative jobs that are emerging in the work world. In Mr. Friedman's view, this triple convergence "of new players, on a new playing field, developing new processes and habits for horizontal collaboration, is the most important force shaping global economics and politics in the early 21st-century."

There are a number of short-term

consequences to this irreversible development. First, our concept of nation-state needs redefinition, since the Internet challenges our traditional notions of boundaries and laws (for example those pertaining to copyright or intellectual property). This will force us to be more articulate about the kind of country we want to preserve in light of the pressures to conform to a more globally driven set of values and beliefs.

Second, there will also be a new desire to question the legitimate role of government in a flat world where authorities are limited by jurisdiction and citizens will want government protection from cheap suppliers who take away domestic jobs but offer low-price consumer goods.

Finally, the role of politicians will have to change dramatically. A significant part of their responsibilities will be to explain to citizens "what world they are living in" and what they will have to do to ensure that they reap the benefits as it converges and flattens.

The implications of this new world order are considerable for Canada and should serve as a call to action to our business, academic, professional and political leaders. The impact of the triple convergence will significantly alter how people prepare for work, how companies compete with one another, how countries organize their

economies and how nations relate to one another. Moreover, it also seems likely that, with a flatter, more integrated world, our political identities will be redefined with the disappearance of traditional political borders.

Once Parliament deals with its current paralysis, we need our parliamentarians to seriously take on some of the more lasting and challenging issues of the day. Our future depends on it.

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