

Problem solvers are 'intellectually lazy'

Lifestyles

The bulldozer of Maple Avenue, and soon of Guelph Street, is a symbol for everything that is moribund and intellectually lazy in Canadian problem solving. In today's fine-tuned world brute strength is counterproductive. Economies like the American and the Russian, that seemed so powerful only yesterday, are in serious trouble because their ruling elites refuse to adapt and to learn and to change their approaches. Japan and West-Germany, by comparison, tiny countries with no resources, have become the world's powerhouses. How come?

I have never been to Japan and therefore am unable to talk about it, but I have several times been in West-Germany in the last 25 years and I can tell you something about the changes I have observed there during this time.

In the mid-sixties, in the first flush of the "economic miracle" or "Wirtschaftswunder", the Germans had a love affair with everything they deemed "modern". Those were the days when they widened roads and tore down old houses to prepare their country for the avalanche of cars that rolled off the production lines of "Volkswagen", "BMW" and "Mercedes Benz". It took them only 10 years to realize that the car is a toy everybody wants to play

with, that the playpens, however, have to be limited in size or the whole country will eventually exist of nothing but high speed roads.

You can not talk to a German motorist about speed restrictions. It's like talking to an American about gun control. But you can slow a German motorist down by making the street appear narrower. At first trees and hedges were planted on the sides of the roads, later lanes for bicycles were taken off the roads, or grassy strips seeded, to make the roads in fact narrower. Did this bring the country to economic ruin? Far from it, as we all know. Some lives were saved instead. Next the communal administrations started to push the cars out of downtown districts by turning those districts into zones for pedestrians only. On the edges of downtown they erected underground or high rise parking garages where the cars had to be left. At first the merchants who operated stores in these districts feared that their customers would stay away. This prediction proved false. There isn't a town anymore in West-Germany that hasn't a heavenly restful pedestrian downtown, where the shopper is the absolute king. Huge crowds flock there at all hours of



John Sommer
IDEAS AND THE ARTS

the day. They walk under trees, sit beside fountains, eat delicious looking food while soaking in the sun at the table of an outdoor restaurant, admire outdoor art that adorns a network of picturesque streets, lanes and squares. Last but not least they do a lot of shopping. When you look at the crowds you begin to wonder if the Germans ever work. How come they have so much time to sit around and eat cake or size each other up? (A lot of kissing goes on in these dreamy spots and women who want to approach men for a chat, or vice versa, are definitely not harassed.) Most Germans

work whenever they want to. Only some factories, that still have production lines, have their workers all work at the same hours. The majority of factories and offices operate in teams and these teams decide when they work, early or late in the day, or at night. In that way the 30 million cars and trucks that are registered in West-Germany are not all out on the road at the same time and traffic jams are, compared to the smallness of the country, few. And do those Germans work! They are trained better than any other workforce in the world. They produce more per hour than any other workforce in the world. They make more money than any other workforce in the world. They work shorter hours than any other workforce in the world (negotiations have started with the goal to reduce the workweek to 35 hours by the year 2000!) They take longer holidays than any other workforce in the world. They are better housed than any other workforce in the world. Because of all this they are more motivated than any other workforce in the world. Their products show it. Everything made in

West-Germany partakes of a quality that is life enhancing. What a civilized country!

Increasingly, when I return to Canada from abroad I am ashamed about the brutishness of my country, the bloodyminded actions of so many people here. Road widening, selling our heritage to the highest bidder, bulldozing down neighbourhoods, fighting over language rights, branding women as criminals, that's all we seem to be able to think about. Fie!

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