

## Thomas d'Aquino warns Canadians on complacency in new book

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One of the architects of Canada's economic success over the past five decades fears that what he helped build is now falling apart.

Thomas d'Aquino, a trusted adviser to prime ministers and CEOs as the Business Council of Canada's long-serving chief executive, played a central role in shaping policy around free trade, the global financial crisis, Quebec separatism and the environment. In his new book, *Private Power, Public Purpose*, published last week, an executive who spent his career working on big ideas confronts a country that now seems content to think small.

"My Canada suffers from complacency," writes Mr. d'Aquino, a British Columbia-born offspring of first-generation Italian immigrants. "In far too many areas of endeavour, we satisfy ourselves with bronze or silver rather than aspiring to gold."

An Ottawa insider from the time he joined prime minister Pierre Trudeau's government in 1968, Mr. d'Aquino wrote a memoir in part to spotlight the vision and willingness to collaborate that led to past successes in politics and business. He says the discipline and consensus-building common to past achievements are now in short supply in government. As a result, good intentions are "often stymied by partisan politics, opportunism and short-term thinking dictated by election cycles."

He wrote the book during the pandemic and points to the postcrisis landscape as a wake-up call for the country's leaders.

"In the wake of a terrible pandemic, and with rising inflation, exploding public debt and threats to global peace, now is the time to set fresh and ambitious priorities and get on with the job," he writes. "Nation-building on a grand scale requires focus and big ideas and ambition to match."

The central theme of the book – that Canada is failing to realize its economic potential – echoes the concerns regarding a lack of focus and an inability to execute expressed in recently published books from former finance minister Bill Morneau and Bank of Canada governor Stephen Poloz.

In Mr. d'Aquino's opinion, the solution to what ails the country lies in good public policy, strong leadership and a willingness to act. He drew on decades spent with more than 1,000 CEOs and countless politicians and civil servants to highlight the key leadership qualities needed to succeed, including ambition, integrity and humility.

"As a country, we excel at producing good policy ideas," he writes. "We punch well below our weight, however, in implementing policy, in turning ideas into action."

In the early 1980s, Mr. d'Aquino played a central role in often contentious negotiations over the National Energy Program and its successor, the Western Accord, with the federal government battling Alberta premier Peter Lougheed and oil and gas executives for control of resources. In the years that followed, the Business Council placed a priority on policies that created a sustainable energy sector. Mr. d'Aquino's book argues the oil and gas industry – one of the largest components of the national economy – is falling short of its potential.

"Once I aspired to Canada becoming an energy and environmental superpower," he writes. "Today, I see a country bitterly divided and sparring, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the progress of our country and humanity requires a symbiotic relationship between environmental and energy policy."

In addition to leading the Business Council, Mr. d'Aquino served as a board member of global businesses such as CGI Group Inc. and Manulife Financial Corp. and the Calgary-based Mannix family's private holding company, which owns one of the country's largest construction firms. He draws on that experience to point out Canada's current struggle to execute on large infrastructure projects such as pipelines.

"We were once a country renowned for its great construction achievements, railways, dams, pipelines and seaways," he writes. "Now we seem to have lost our capacity to think big and deliver even bigger."

As an Ottawa resident, he had a front-row seat for last year's convoy protests and the federal government's use of the Emergencies Act to end the occupation of the capital. Both Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and federal Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre put a partisan spin on the protests. In his book, Mr. d'Aquino warns that populist trends are becoming the norm in domestic politics, further hindering the government's ability to get things done.

"Extremism and hate have made their debut in our political discourse, and respect for individuals and institutions is in retreat," he writes. "I am deeply troubled by the wave of denial and cynicism I see in our public discourse, especially by those who offer the construct of the Canadian state as a failure."