

Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

by Theodore Plantinga

The Canadian federal election of June 1997 had two themes running through it. One was national unity, which basically means the question of Quebec's place and the threat of secession. The other was "jobs, jobs, jobs" (some of the politicians who raised the issue seem to love repeating the word). It was evident from the discussion that the politicians did not know just what to do about job creation, and so they tended to slip back into the old debate about Quebec and unity. Yet they were all united on the value and necessity of stressing jobs and job creation.

As I listened to them, it struck me that they were markedly out of step with a type of literature that has been in circulation for years now -- and not just on university campuses. I am referring to the "brave new world" books and articles that confidently proclaim the end of jobs and of the tyranny of punching the timeclock. It seems that we are moving into an exciting new world in which people will no longer have jobs. How is it that our politicians do not realize this?

The answer is simple: the politicians are listening to the public, which does not yet seem ready for a "dejobbed" world. People, in general, simply do not believe that a dejobbed future is either good or desirable. Why not?

Before I try to answer that question, I should try to clarify what the jobless future thesis really amounts to, for it is not quite so radical as it sounds at first. It is not that we will all win the lottery, quit our humdrum jobs, and live off our investments; even if we could all win the lottery, we would still need people to ring up our purchases at the supermarket and run the local carwash. (I assume we would not be washing our own cars.) No, the thesis is rather that conditions of paid employment are changing significantly and will continue to change. There will be less job security in the future and much more need for us to adapt ourselves to changing conditions. We may well be encouraged to "incorporate" ourselves and lease our services to our former employers. We would then be self-employed and might even consider printing a business card on which the lofty term "consultant" would appear.

An important dimension of the change -- and the source of much unrest in the manufacturing sector, is "outsourcing," which is usually branded as both good and inevitable in the literature proclaiming the death of jobs. Throughout our century, many companies felt free to contract out some work when things got busy. Sometimes it was cheaper to outsource certain operations, especially to firms in foreign lands where labor costs were substantially lower. Workers and unions fought back, recognizing outsourcing as a threat to long-term job security. What has happened more recently is that outsourcing has grown and has become more socially acceptable.

Like most people, I am ambivalent about outsourcing. As a consumer I appreciate the prospect of lower prices, especially for items that I must buy often. But when it comes to other items, the ones I don't really need, I prefer more stability. Take the business of professional sports, where brand name stability has fallen to a low ebb. Many fans have lost considerable interest and enthusiasm in the process, and the professional leagues are working hard to recruit a following among the younger set.

Now, the term outsourcing is not normally used in connection with an activity like hockey, and the rules governing the game certainly discourage it. Is there some penalty-killing to be done? Let's bring in a few players from the such-and-such agency, who will do the job more cheaply than our overpriced stars with their massive egos. It sounds silly, and it doesn't really work that way. Yet the sad truth is that there is quite a turnover in hockey personnel, much of it motivated by financial considerations. The fan is left shaking his head and muttering that he no longer recognizes his favorite team: "The Habs aren't the Habs any more"

Many fans of hockey, including the undersigned, value continuity and loyalty. We do not like to see a player traded because of one slow season. And we do not like to see the traditional style of play abandoned because there is a rapid turnover of coaches, each of whom is eager to put his own stamp on the team.

Part of what I value is long-term relationships. I like to see a team commit itself to young players, develop them, and even encourage them to finish their career with the team and perhaps serve the team in some other capacity off the ice during their retirement years. It's not that I object to the trading of players altogether, but I do appreciate the sense that my team is still my team. There is great value in building and nurturing long-terms relationships.

Another area of human endeavor threatened by outsourcing and the mentality behind the jobless future is higher education. In an elementary school, adult

supervision of youngsters is one of the important factors to be considered when assessing what is needed and what is not. At the secondary level, supervision is also still a consideration to be borne in mind. On the tertiary level, however, the students are supposed to be adults, and the teachers are therefore free to concentrate on teaching. Now, the fact that tertiary education is increasingly expensive nowadays (in both public and private institutions) leads people to think of outsourcing (although the term is not generally used). A Harvard education and degree is rather expensive. Couldn't one obtain the degree and affiliation and the benefits that go with it, while picking up a substantial amount of the education associated with this prestigious degree on an outsourcing basis, thereby incurring a much lower cost? Universities do allow this sort of thing up to a point; that is to say, they are careful to set quantitative limits on the amount of outsourced learning they will permit under the rubric of their degree.

As I contemplate these possibilities, I cannot help but think of Ivan Illich, whose stimulating and controversial book *Deschooling Society* (1971) is very much in tune with the mentality of outsourcing and the jobless world of the future. While I am ultimately not in agreement with Illich, I do believe it is a useful exercise to think about his proposal and to decide why it is wrong-headed and socially not useful.

An obvious line of response is to say, simply, that the community of scholars ideal would be destroyed by Illich's decidedly commercial approach to education. Here we have the business of long-term relationships again. People who learn from one another should not limit their contact to atomistic units of information transfer. A sense of an overarching common purpose does a great deal for deepening and enhancing relations between students and teachers in higher education. This is one reason why religiously-grounded institutions are quite effective. (In radically pluralistic institutions, on the other hand, teachers and students would have relatively little in common in terms of overall purposes and would therefore tend to relate to one another on a more superficial basis.)

There is a social and philosophical bias in the argument I have developed thus far, and it deserves to be recognized and stated. My bias is this: I believe human beings are created to form enduring relationships with one another in a number of dimensions of their lives. This need is the basis for our desire for identity, which can be defined as a strong sense of who we are. We need to strive to remain the same even in the face of change all around us as time passes. I recognize that this bias is rooted to some degree in my own Christian

convictions, but I would maintain that many people who are not Christians also accept it as partially constitutive of our humanity.

To illustrate the bias briefly and to indicate its value as a way to shed light on human life, consider marriage. In a marriage between a man and a woman, there are many components, dimensions and transactions. If we wished to apply to marriage the type of reasoning which people nowadays apply to jobs, we could well ask whether some of those transactions between husbands and wives could not be outsourced. Who needs a husband? Wouldn't a follower of Ivan Illich advice use the Yellow Pages (or some internet-based successor to it) to shop for such transactions and get the lowest price? Buy only what you need - when you need it. Likewise, we should learn only what we need to know, and not until we need it. Companionship, domestic help, sex - all these things can be bought with a price. Who needs a wife? Bear in mind that a wife, like a unionized employee, can be hard to get rid of!

Precisely because I value long-term relationships, I cannot rejoice with the advocates of the brave new world of joblessness, the world in which, according to William Bridges, "... individuals need to forget jobs and look for the work that needs doing ..." [NOTE 1] I still value long-term relationships, loyalty and social stability -- in sports, in education, in male/female contacts, and in the world of our daily work. There are still some jobs around. I've held the same one for the past fifteen years, and I've been married even longer than that. In this election year, I wish more Canadians could enjoy my good fortune.

NOTES

[1] *Jobshift* (Addison-Wesley, 1994), p. 179.