

Europe's example: Better tech, better technicians

The more we value our public infrastructure, the more we value those who build it, says Paul Cappon

It is well understood that male learners in Canada are falling behind, with unfortunate results for them individually and for the country's productivity and human capital. The express train of women learners has left the station while many men wait on the platform. The resulting gender imbalance is reflected through many phases of learning, with far-reaching and largely negative consequences down the line for our economy and society.

What can we do about this? Would having better trains make a difference? Better road systems, better toilets, public transportation and lighting systems? Yes, it turns out – these things make a significant difference to male learning outcomes.

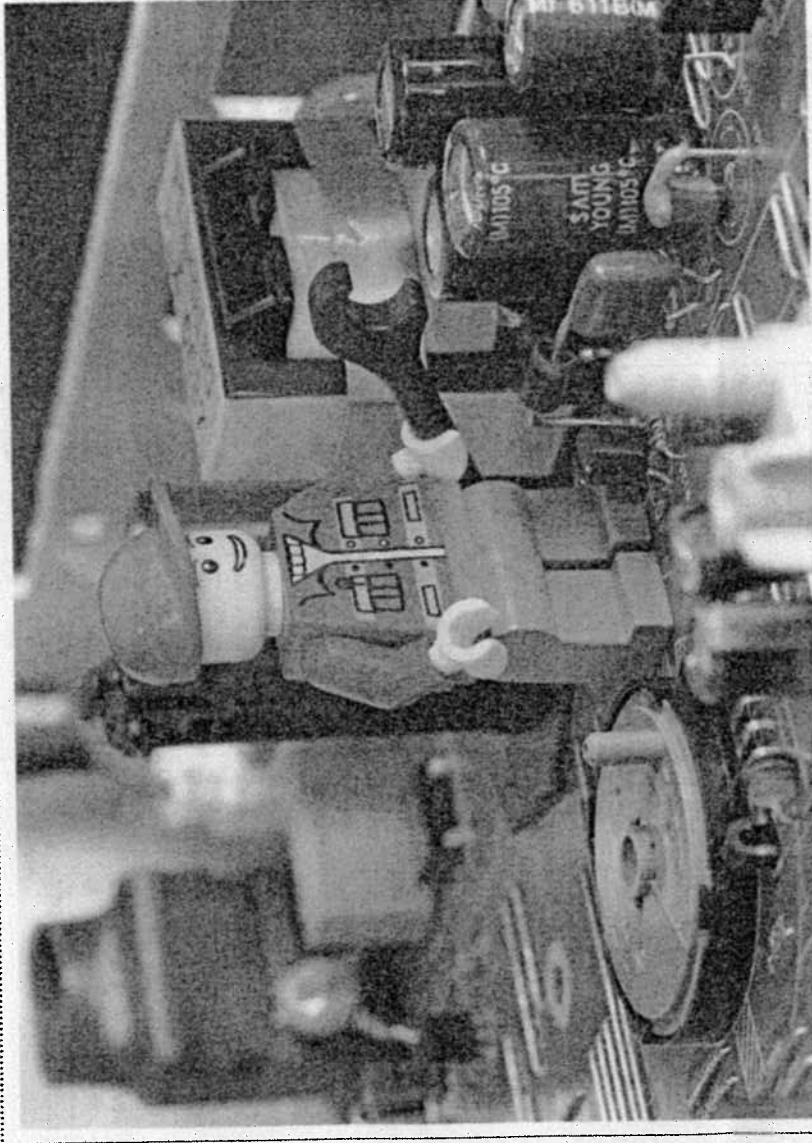
One striking difference between Canada and advanced European countries is their far superior public infrastructure and public technologies. Europeans have modern passenger rail services. North American trains are risible.

For decades, Europeans have used sensing devices to switch electric lighting on and off in public spaces, such as hotels and office buildings. Instead of deploying this simple technology, Canada wastes millions of watts annually. Dual-speed toilets are commonplace in Europe, while Canada's antiquated bowls continue to flush away billions of litres of an increasingly scarce resource.

European and East Asian cities have advanced, modern public transportation. With the possible exception of Vancouver, Canadians remain mired in Third World local travelling conditions and urban sprawl. The list goes on and on: above-ground power lines; traffic lights instead of roundabouts.

North Americans may have access to private devices like BlackBerry. The key difference is that these are private, not elements of a robust collective and social life. Those who maintain and improve progressive infrastructure for the public good are the skilled workers and technicians of advanced economies in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Scandinavia and elsewhere. These workers are overwhelmingly male.

Because they know they support better, safer, more ecologically sound applications in the



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public interest, people in those countries enter skilled trades with pride. They are aware they are making essential contributions to their society's well-being and progress. They also know that cutting-edge technology requires continuous upgrading of their skills. They become better learners.

They are affirmed. They are valued. And they are motivated – even if their school-based education may not be the same as their female counterparts.

For men, this means that they have another important outlet for training and educational aspirations. This, in turn, means that the education gap between men and women – present but less severe in Europe – will not have as dramatic consequences for human capital.

Pride is taken in environmentally responsible public infrastructure. Private enterprise is eager to offer apprenticeship placements. Large public investments are made in vocational training at many levels, through which male learners become productive and effective.

In Canada, by contrast, as a re-

sult of our fixation on U.S. models and perceptions, we may not even recognize how backward our technologies are. No prestige is attached to the trades because there is little of significance in the public space for them to maintain and improve. And so, our overwhelming hope is that our children attend university, preferably to become doctors, lawyers or currency traders. In turn, this further weakens state and private sector support for technical occupations and innovation in the

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... linguistic and cultural duality is not a weakness, but a great strength that must be a source of pride for all Canadians.

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collective sphere.

In contrast to Europe's virtuous circle, ours is a vicious circle: unattractive vocational status undermines our drive to implement the modern public services and devices that Europeans take for granted.

In meeting the challenge to

male learners, Canada needs to undergo a cultural shift that begins with a determination to catch up technologically. Emphasizing human infrastructure through improved male learning and training is complementary to investing in physical infrastructure. If the infrastructure is public, resource-sparing, cutting-edge – as opposed to destructive urban sprawl – men will flock to master the sophisticated skills that support the progress of

entire populations.

If we want Canadian men to be productive, lifelong learners, we must advance public technologies. They will then join women on the fast track to better educational outcomes.

Paul Cappon is president and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning.