

The French poet Paul Valéry wrote that the trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be – which seems to contradict the Book of Ecclesiastes – which says that there's nothing new under the sun.

Looking at the world in 1993, you could make a strong case either way. The challenges of the current world situation contain elements of the old and the new – of continuity and change.

The category of the old includes the survival in our time of ethnic tensions that have been smouldering for hundreds of years – and the continuity of poverty and famine in many parts of the world.

And change is strongly represented too. We confront it today in the form of new technologies, new competitive challenges and the need to adjust to a restructuring of economies on a global scale.

Along with other countries, we in Canada have had to confront these challenges, specific to our own situation. And we have done so with an approach to public policy that is, itself, a blend of continuity and change.

We have based our broad macroeconomic policies on a few basic principles that are hardly revolutionary. They were, in fact, the conventional wisdom of 1867, when the Canadian Confederation came into being. With minor variations, it is the approach taken by every successful industrialized nation.

Countries that have employed the right mix of the traditional and the innovative have prospered.

Countries that got it backward – that were too prone to abandon the basics and too firmly locked into traditional ways of applying them – have fallen behind. And it is because of this universal relevance that I want to talk today about change and continuity in the Canadian context. I will point to some examples of these elements in our current national agenda and in the way we are tackling it. Let me first sketch in the background.

The government of which I'm a member came into office in the Canadian general election of 1984. And as anyone who knows Canada can testify, there has been a dramatic change in the economic environment since then. In fact, some observers – including a few at home – have characterized the policies that produced that change as radical. Yet, if you take that word back to its literal meaning – growing out of the roots – it was exactly the opposite.