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## **Trying to pull London out of its steep nosedive**

When I think of London these days, I think of a plane trying to pull out of a nosedive.

For years now, the city has been in uncontrolled descent. In the cockpit, we've had 19 pilots, our members of city council, with their eyes firmly fixed on the instrument panel but on the wrong gauges. They've been looking at the fuel gauges instead of the altimeter that shows exactly how high above the earth we are and how much time and distance we have left before impact.

The fuel gauges, of course, have told all these pilots that we're flying beautifully. Here we are travelling at near-supersonic speed and hardly using fuel at all! It's a miracle! These pilots of ours, as they never cease to tell us, have discovered how to fly a modern city without spending much, thereby keeping taxes extremely low. And back in economy class, most Londoners have been enjoying the ride, at least until recently.

But at some point in the past year, some of our pilots have actually glanced at the altimeter. My God, they've cried out, we're not flying! We're actually falling! In fact, there's almost no time left before the big crash. What do we do?

So they've responded by opening the throttles, revving up the engines and trying to regain control. Local hospitals have received more money. An antiquated sewer system is being renewed. The university will get increased municipal support. A new downtown market has been built and other downtown projects are in the works.

Yes, millions of dollars have been spent or pledged, the pilots are frantically struggling with the controls and yes, yes, the angle of descent is lessening and the nose is coming up but the strain is incredible. The whole plane is shaking and rattling and back in economy class, the G-forces are almost unbearable. Gravity is pushing us into our seats, sucking future tax dollars out of our pockets and yet, every time we look out the windows, the ground still looks as if it's getting closer and closer.

And now the aircraft is threatening to come apart. The momentum of the dive is so strong that some of the major components seem to be trying to tear themselves away as the plane starts to pull out. First the Grand Theatre announces it's heading for disaster and now Orchestra London, hit by unexpected provincial taxes, is facing serious financial problems.

And that raises a critical question for our 19 pilots: What happens if we pull out of our nosedive only to discover that the wings have fallen off? Can a city continue to "fly" and even gain altitude without its basic cultural institutions? Has anyone ever tried to do that before?

The short answer is no. You cannot pretend to be a viable city without at least a good library system, an art gallery, a theatre and a symphony orchestra. Otherwise, you're just a large nondescript town. It is these institutions that form the basis of what is now called "quality of life" for residents and visitors. It is why people want to work and live in a city, visit it on their holidays and spend money in it.

Maintaining and strengthening these institutions has to be a major part of the city's current drive to attract new investment and people, particularly the kind of high-tech industries and highly educated workers these industries require. Otherwise, they will migrate to other cities that have a clearer sense of their own importance and identity.

But years of "nosedive" civic management have left all these institutions dangerously weak. London once had one of the finest municipal library systems in the country. No longer. The Grand Theatre, the most beautiful playhouse in the country, is in crisis because it receives far less financial support from all levels of government than any other comparable theatre in the country. And Orchestra London, in a city with a larger population than Kitchener-Waterloo, Windsor or Thunder Bay, receives less from its civic government than orchestras in those other cities. Kitchener-Waterloo provides an orchestra of lesser quality with double the \$125,000 annual municipal grant Orchestra London receives.

On a per-capita basis, those other three cities provide about three times as much money to their orchestras as does London.

During this difficult but exciting transition period, as the city struggles to cope with the after-effects of decades of decline and set itself on a new course, preserving our basic cultural institutions has to be an important aspect of the recovery strategy.

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