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Resilience is key to surviving future upheaval, says speaker

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The world is due for some upheaval, and the human race had better be ready for what's to come, according to Dr. Thomas Homer-Dixon, director of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies.

Homer-Dixon, a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto will visit the University of Alberta Tuesday, Nov. 14 to speak about his latest book, *The Upside of Down*.

"There are a number of trends that suggest that we've got a pretty volatile future in front of us," he said, speaking from Los Angeles, the latest stop on his speaking tour. "There will be some significant crises - and maybe even social breakdown ostensibly arising from things like climate change and energy shock - and that this actually may ultimately create opportunities for us to produce real reform in our societies."

In his book, Homer-Dixon points to five 'tectonic stresses' - elements that are increasingly undermining the societies with which we are so familiar - the growing human population, our effect on the environment, dwindling energy supplies, advancing disease and the growing gap between rich and the poor. He also identifies two 'multipliers' that are continually adding pressure to the tectonic stresses.

"The first of these is the rising complexity, connectedness and velocity of human technologies, institutions and social interactions," he said. "The second multiplier is the relentlessly escalating power of individuals and sub-groups - like terrorists and insurgents - to destroy things and people."

All of these things are going to lead to some pretty "big shocks" in the next few decades, said Homer-Dixon.

"I would expect that we're going to see some pretty wild stuff within my son's lifetime, and he's just approaching two years. Certainly, within the next 30 or 40 years, I think things will change dramatically," he said. "We can't know what the future's going to look like, but we can say that some of the underlying trends don't look very good and we're not addressing them very effectively. So, the probability of some major breakdown is rising and may be rising fast."

But the end result doesn't have to be catastrophic, said Homer-Dixon.

"People tend to dichotomize the future into two possibilities; one is that everything's going to be peachy because we're going to manage our way through our problems and we're going to have a lovely future, and the other possibility is sort of cataclysm - the end of the world, Mad Max kind of thing," he said. "There's actually a whole range of possibilities between those two poles and that's actually where we're going to be and those possibilities are actually much more interesting, because sometimes crisis is needed to produce real change."

The world has already been through this on a smaller scale, said Homer-Dixon, pointing to the devastation of the economic collapse in the 1920s and '30s.

“Not only are we headed for some really big shocks, but probably we need them to get some positive changes underway. There are some times in history where this has happened and productive change has occurred,” he said. “One example would have been the Great Depression, which Franklin D. Roosevelt used as an opportunity for fundamental reform of American capitalism. This was a horrible, horrible crisis for many people. It’s beyond conception for most of us now, the kind of hardship they went through. But it certainly did create both the motive and the opportunity for FDR to do some really profound restructuring.”

Although some critics have given Homer-Dixon the moniker of ‘Dr. Doom,’ he insists he’s really dealing with a message of hope and responsibility.

“There’s an awful lot we can do as individuals. We have an ethical obligation to our children. I want to look at my son who’s now 20 months old and say to him as he grows into adulthood that I tried to do what I could. I think we all have an ethical obligation, but beyond that, I think that small things add up, small contributions from individuals can add up and make a huge difference,” he said.

“Look at how rapidly we’ve changed fertility rates around the world. Much faster than most demographers were thinking it would happen 25 years ago. There are probably, as a result, about two billion people fewer people on the planet than we expected. That may make the difference between having a humane and prosperous future for humankind and not, and yet that was the result of individual decisions.”

If people remain flexible and resilient, they’ll be able to weather the storm, said Homer-Dixon. At least, that’s what he hopes his son will learn from him.

“He needs to be a versatile person, a resilient person,” he said. “I think that, beyond anything, you need to maintain the hope that there will be a way through this set of challenges, which I think are probably the biggest that humankind has ever faced.”

Dr. Thomas Homer-Dixon will be speaking on The Upside of Down on Nov. 14 at 7 p.m. in Engineering Teaching Learning Complex (ETLC) room E2-002. Copies of his book will be on sale. The event is free.