DATA DIVE **WITH** NIK NANOS

THE REAL 'CANCEL CULTURE'

As Omicron spreads and provinces ramp up restrictions, Canadians – especially young people –
are less confident about the state of the country and economy

One year ago, Canadians were feeling pretty good about the state of the federation. Governments were proactively fighting the pandemic, and stimulus was being pumped into the economy. We weren't thriving, but there was a sense we were coping – at the very least.

The pandemic was an opportunity for provincial leaders, many of whom were rewarded with renewed or even stronger mandates.

But the tide has turned. What was once a political windfall may now be a pitfall, as Canadians increasingly feel the grind of a pandemic that seems to just not want to go away.

Since 2007, Nanos has been conducting the annual Mood of Canada tracking survey, which measures key dimensions on the state of the country. The latest instalment, conducted during the emergence of the Omicron variant, shows an overall souring of the national mood on several fronts.

The proportion of Canadians who think the country is moving in the wrong direction has jumped from 27 per cent to 40 per cent in the past 12 months.

But what may be most significant is the generational divide. Younger Canadians are much more likely to believe Canada is moving in the wrong direction (48 per cent) than older Canadians.

Should we be surprised?

There's a new "cancel culture" emerging – with an increasing number of young Canadians cancelling their dreams. The Omicron variant and high inflation have been a one-two punch. In a recent survey completed by Nanos for CTV News, people under 35 were more likely to report cancelling a planned house purchase (62 per cent, compared with a national average of 50 per cent) or cancelling a vacation (62 per cent, compared with a national average of 53 per cent). To put this into context, young people are more than six times more likely to cancel rather than speed up buying a home because of concerns about the rising cost of living.

Young Canadians are the least likely to have confidence in their pay keeping up with the rising cost of living. According to a survey for The Globe and Mail by Nanos, three-quarters of individuals under 35 lack that confidence (10 points higher than the national average).

Last year, when asked about the performance of the federal government, Canadians were much more likely to score Ottawa positively – very good (17 per cent) or somewhat good (30 per cent). In the past 12 months, this positive score has dropped from 47 per cent to 33 per cent. And younger people are more likely to give a thumbs down to Justin Trudeau's Liberals (49 per cent) than their parents (40 per cent).

Canadians are already feeling increasingly negative about the relationship between the federal and provincial governments in the context of the pandemic response.

Four in 10 Canadians described federal-provincial relations as improved (10 per cent) or somewhat improved (30 per cent) at the end of 2020. This positive sentiment has dropped to one in four Canadians (4 per cent improved and 21 per cent somewhat improved at the end of 2021). Among residents of the Prairies, a paltry 9 per cent believe federal-provincial relations have become better over the past year.

The views of Canadians on the state of our international reputation do not fare much better.

Looking at all 15 years of tracking by Nanos, 2021 ranks among the three worst years on this measure. People are twice as likely to say our international reputation has not improved (25 per cent) or somewhat not improved (20 per cent), with only 6 per cent saying it has improved and another 15 per cent saying it has somewhat improved.

We begin 2022 with a public opinion environment that is more sour than it was in the middle of the first pandemic wave.
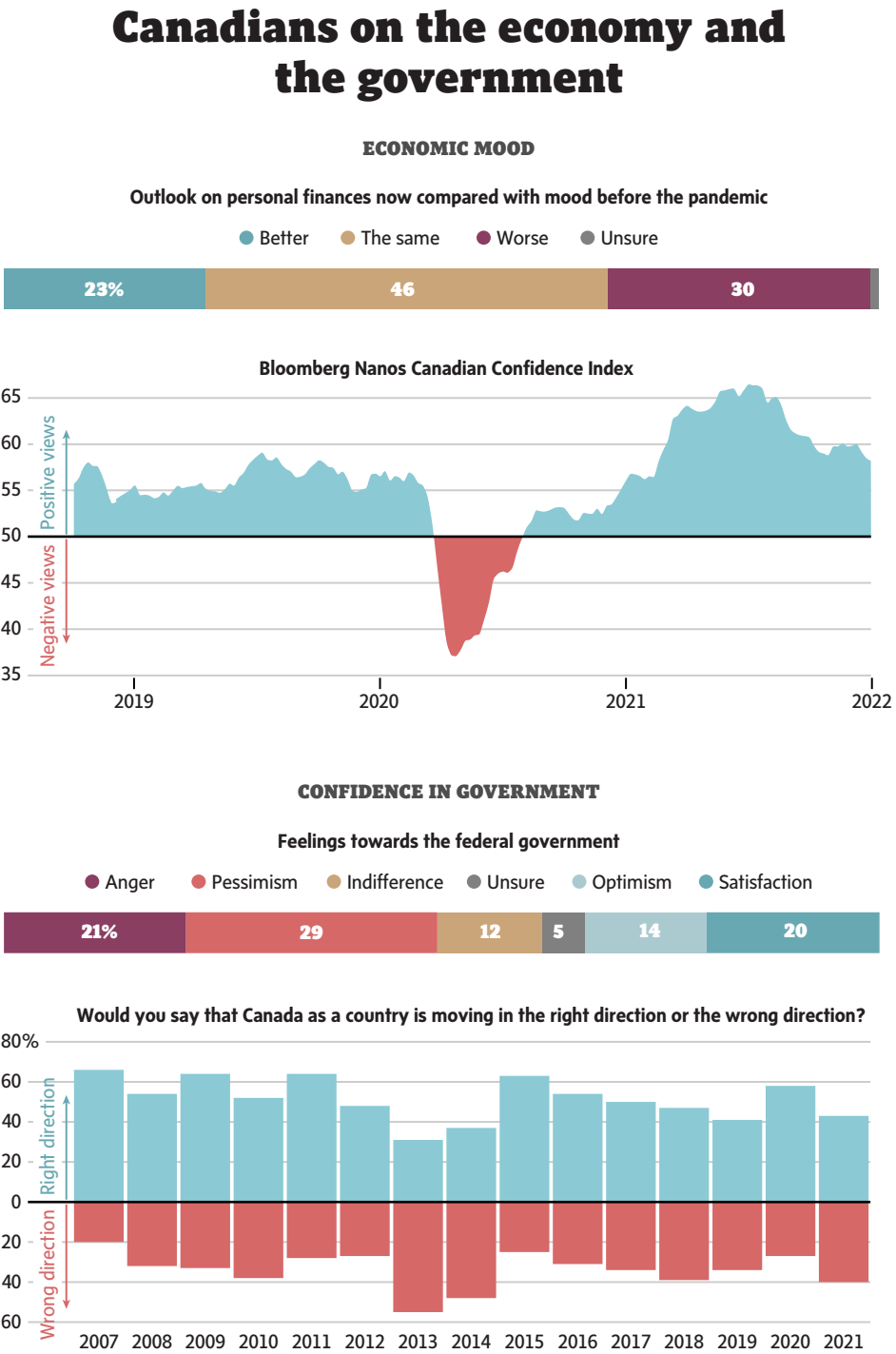
A look at the words people would use to best describe how they feel about the federal government suggests a continuing negative undertone. Twenty-nine per cent would use the word "pessimism," followed by "anger" (21 per cent), "satisfaction" (20 per cent), "optimism" (14 per cent) and "indifference" (12 per cent).

Views on the strength of the economy, as measured by the Bloomberg Nanos Canadian Confidence Index, provide little solace: 46 per cent of Canadians think the economy will be weaker in the next six months, compared with 19 per cent who believe it will get stronger.

The first step to finding a solution is to recognize that there is a problem. Right now, with COVID-19 cases on the upswing and economies being locked down, Canada needs political leaders of all stripes to propose long-term solutions for both public health and economic resilience. Booster shots and the government's Canada Worker Lockdown Benefit are very important yet short-term measures.

The path forward needs to rise above the endemic partisanship in our political culture. Elected officials should be aware of the pessimism of younger Canadians and how the combined forces of the pandemic and inflation are cancelling their hopes and dreams.

Canadians on the economy and the government

ECONOMIC MOOD

Outlook on personal finances now compared with mood before the pandemic

● Better   ● The same   ● Worse   ● Unsure

| 23% | 46 | 30 | |

Bloomberg Nanos Canadian Confidence Index

Positive views / Negative views — chart ranging from 35 to 65, with 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 along the axis.

CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

Feelings towards the federal government

● Anger   ● Pessimism   ● Indifference   ● Unsure   ● Optimism   ● Satisfaction

| 21% | 29 | 12 | 5 | 14 | 20 |

Would you say that Canada as a country is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?

Right direction / Wrong direction — bar chart from 2007 to 2021.

MURAT YÜKSELIR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

What's going to save us all? Our imaginations

It takes some faith, believing there's room in modern life for something as ineffable as your dreams. The cold, ominous data we receive pretty much constantly seems to have made our imaginations obsolete. Analytics became part of our everyday conversation, and more obviously began lording over our collective lives, with Michael Lewis's Moneyball in 2003. He made an unlikely hero out of Billy Beane, the revolutionary general manager of the small-market Oakland A's, and his use of statistics to level the playing field against the free-spending New York Yankees of the world.

In the nearly two decades since, perhaps even Mr. Beane couldn't have predicted the influence that analytics – and its supremely logical cousins, like algorithms and artificial intelligence – would hold over us. You have never been less of a who and more of a what than you are right now.

Your car-insurance rates aren't directly tied to your driving abilities; your address, length of commute and credit score matter as much. (An affluent drunk driver will sometimes pay less than a poor person with a spotless record.) Hundreds of millions of us have voluntarily posted pictures of ourselves on social media, ignorant that we're now in facial-recognition databases. It's no accident, obviously, that Google knows you were shopping for bedframes last night. Netflix is 98 per cent sure that you'll enjoy Ozark because you watched Fargo in exactly three sittings.

But data has its limits, and so it leaves its openings. Mr. Beane inspired countless imitators, and as many charlatans, who have tried and failed to quantify the unquantifiable. One of my favourite quotes about the gaps in what analytics can divine comes from Paul Maurice, until recently the coach of the Winnipeg Jets: "God, they do a horseshit job of telling you what five guys do."

Mr. Maurice said what he said about analytics when Blake Wheeler was blamed for a costly on-ice mistake. Statistically speaking, the error was his. Mr. Maurice had a different perspective on the play: "He got put in a real tough spot by a horseshit backcheck by somebody else."

The numbers didn't account for that sneaky "somebody else." Only someone like Paul Maurice can, and did.

Unfortunately, the analytics movement has become a kind of purity test, in sports and elsewhere. Dr. Ian Graham, a physicist and now back-room architect for Liverpool, the English Premier League giants, famously refuses to watch actual games, fearing that emotion will leak into his otherwise dispassionate statistical analysis of players. I don't doubt that Dr. Graham is very smart, but smart zealotry is still zealotry. By my lights, the Robespierres of the analytical revolution have traded one strain of myopia for another.

Now imagine trying to engineer something far more complicated and dynamic than a sporting contest – like, say, the future of humanity, which can seem uncertain at best, and apocalyptic at worst. What on Earth could be capable of such a tall order? Or more accurately, who?

Data can help us. But give me a set of wise, inquisitive, empathetic eyes every time. Give me you.

If that sounds naive, I'd argue that we've forgotten, sometimes, what the right people can bring to a difficult situation. Moneyball proved that some baseball wisdom was hokum. That's led to a cancerous belief that experts are never to be trusted, that numbers are our only truly objective means of measuring ourselves.

Talk about myths. Statistics are used to lie all the time, and algorithms aren't found in nature; they're made by humans and contain everything that humans contain, including bias. (Those facial-recognition algorithms are pretty good at identifying white people, but they're not nearly as adept at identifying people of colour, particularly women of colour. Why do you think that might be?)

And just because experts are sometimes proven incorrect doesn't mean they're always incorrect. They're more likely to be right than non-experts – consider those maligned old baseball scouts who, despite their wrongheaded belief in clutch hitters, still managed to find Mickey Mantle and Roberto Clemente.

Unlike machines, experts are also capable of self-correction. Experts seek to improve.

Which returns me to the challenges presented by our uncertain and/or apocalyptic future. Not only is our future together an incredibly complex system, its very uncertainty also means that making a better future for all of us will demand a truly human enterprise.

Data mining works when the future behaves like the past. Do you feel like our present resembles even our recent past? No mainframe would have known how to respond to the emergence of COVID-19.

Similarly, computer models are better than humans at predicting typical weather, because computers can process more variables more quickly, and they never have off days. But present them with something outside of the norm, and they don't know what to do. During 2020's horrific wildfire season, for instance, Washington state's air-quality instruments dismissed their own readings as impossible. Only humans could accurately gauge the terrible reality.

Humans aren't perfect, of course. We've manufactured for ourselves many of the problems that we now have to solve.

But over the course of my career in journalism, I've spent time with enough creative people to believe that those solutions are still most likely to be found within us.

I've watched human musicians write beautiful, human songs that have captured the hearts of human audiences, and human detectives solve awful, human crimes, and human doctors cure other humans of previously incurable human diseases. My new book, The Eye Test: A Case for Human Creativity in the Age of Analytics, is essentially an examination of how the most creative humans do what they do, and it's rarely by doing math, or by using numbers alone. Perhaps unintentionally, by making our world too chaotic to quantify, we've remade a place for our most inspired selves.

Maybe you feel as though you have particular skills and experience that make you well-suited to fight certain sinister forces, or invent a new way to do something important better, or make something beautiful just for the sake of beauty. Maybe you feel, too, that over the past couple of decades, you and good people like you have been marginalized – dismissed as out of touch, or Luddites, or innumerate, or "so-called experts."

It's not easy, being told you don't know what you think you know, on top of everything else we're expected to process these days. In the midst of so much bad news, I have good news for you: You're needed now more than ever. What makes you the perfect instrument for positive change – to dissect complexity, and navigate uncertainty – is the one human feature that machines have never been able to mimic or replicate: your imagination.

It is yours and yours alone. It is a supply of one. And like the future, the demand is whatever we dream it might be.

Perhaps unintentionally, by making our world too chaotic to quantify, we've remade a place for our most inspired selves.