

5 White Guys: Canadian Banking Exposé

A Critical Analysis of Money Creation, Corporate Power, and Systemic Inequality

By Marie-Soleil Seshat Landry

Foreword

This book examines a fundamental but largely invisible system: how money is created in Canada, who controls that process, and what consequences flow from that concentration of power. The analysis is rooted in economic mechanics, historical precedent, and contemporary data. Readers unfamiliar with banking may find certain concepts challenging, but the core argument is straightforward: a tiny executive elite wields enormous influence over the financial lives of millions through a system that generates private profits while distributing risks across the public.

Understanding this system is not an exercise in conspiracy theory. It is an exercise in reading financial statements, following the money, and asking difficult questions about power, equity, and democratic governance.

Introduction: The Invisible Architecture of Canadian Finance

Walk into a bank in any Canadian city. Behind the glass and polished counters lies a deceptively simple transaction: you borrow money, the bank creates a deposit in your account, and you owe interest. This daily occurrence masks one of the most consequential facts about modern economies: the majority of money in circulation is not created by governments or central banks, but by private commercial banks issuing loans.

In Canada, this system concentrates extraordinary power in the hands of five individuals—the CEOs of the Big Five banks. These executives are not household names. Few Canadians know their faces. Yet their decisions ripple through the entire economy, shaping housing markets, corporate strategy, investment patterns, and the debt

obligations of millions.

This book answers three interconnected questions:

1. **How is money created?** Not through printing presses, but through digital ledger entries that reflect new debt.
2. **Who benefits?** The architects of the system—bankers, executives, and early recipients of newly created credit.
3. **Who bears the cost?** The public, through inflation, interest payments, and systemic exposure to financial instability.

The argument is neither left nor right in traditional terms. It is structural. The system operates exactly as designed—to concentrate wealth and power upward. Awareness of this design is the first step toward imagining alternatives.

Chapter 1: The Mechanics of Money Creation

The Modern Money Myth

Most people believe that money originates in one of two ways: either governments print it, or central banks issue it into circulation. Neither is accurate. In modern economies like Canada's, approximately 97% of the money supply consists of bank deposits—digital records of debt. When a bank issues a loan, it simultaneously creates a deposit. Both appear on the balance sheet: an asset for the bank (the loan owed) and a liability (the deposit the borrower can spend).

This is not a side effect of banking. It is the fundamental mechanism through which commercial banks create money.

Consider a mortgage application: A family seeks to borrow \$500,000 to purchase a home. The bank does not withdraw this money from a vault or transfer it from other depositors' accounts. Instead, the bank's computer system performs two simultaneous entries:

- **Debit side:** The borrower's account increases by \$500,000 (a new deposit).
- **Credit side:** The borrower owes \$500,000 (a new loan).

This is new money, created from nothing but the bank's willingness to extend credit and the borrower's promise to repay. The money does not pre-exist. It comes into being at the moment the loan is issued.

This process happens millions of times daily across Canadian banks. Each mortgage, auto loan, business credit line, and student loan generates new money. Over time, this process inflates the money supply, but it also creates an obligation: the borrower must repay more than they borrowed (principal plus interest), requiring even more money creation in future periods to service the growing debt.

The Bank of Canada and the Illusion of Central Control

The Bank of Canada, established in 1935, serves as Canada's central bank. Its responsibilities include:

- Issuing physical currency (banknotes)
- Acting as banker to the federal government
- Managing the country's foreign exchange reserves
- Executing monetary policy through interest rate decisions

Many assume the Bank of Canada creates most Canadian money. It does not. Physical currency represents less than 3% of the total money supply. The Bank of Canada's primary tool for influencing the money supply is the *policy interest rate*—the rate at which commercial banks borrow from one another overnight. By adjusting this rate, the Bank of Canada indirectly influences how much banks are willing to lend, and therefore how much money they create.

But the Bank of Canada does not directly control the quantity of money created by commercial banks. That power resides with the banks themselves, constrained only by:

1. **Regulatory capital requirements:** Banks must maintain certain ratios of capital to loans to ensure they can absorb losses.
2. **Risk management models:** Banks use internal assessments of creditworthiness to decide whom to lend to and how much.
3. **Market perception:** If banks are seen as taking excessive risk, depositors and investors may withdraw funds or demand higher returns.

These are soft constraints. They do not prevent money creation; they merely modulate it. A bank determined to expand lending—to maximize profits—can do so within these constraints, creating vast quantities of new money in the process.

Fractional Reserve Banking: The Misnomer

Traditional economic textbooks describe fractional reserve banking as a system where banks must hold a fixed fraction of deposits in reserve. For example, if the reserve

requirement were 10%, a bank with \$100 million in deposits would be required to hold \$10 million in reserve and could lend out \$90 million.

This description does not apply to Canada. Canadian banks have no statutory reserve requirement. They are required to meet regulatory capital standards (primarily the Basel III framework), which prescribes minimum ratios of capital to risk-weighted assets, not ratios of reserves to deposits.

This distinction is profound. Under a true fractional reserve system, the quantity of money creation is mathematically limited: if the reserve ratio is 10%, the money multiplier is 10, and total money creation is capped at some multiple of the central bank's monetary base.

In Canada's system, this mathematical ceiling does not exist. Banks can create as much money as they can justify through credit risk models and capital requirements. During economic booms, when banks are confident in lending and regulators are lenient, money creation accelerates. During crises, it can contract sharply. The system is inherently pro-cyclical, amplifying booms and busts.

The Cantillon Effect in Motion: Who Gets the Money First?

One of the most underappreciated consequences of money creation is *who receives newly created money first*. This timing matters enormously.

Imagine a bank creates \$100 million in new money through commercial real estate loans. A developer borrows this money to acquire land and construct a building. The developer immediately has \$100 million in purchasing power. They use it to hire contractors, purchase materials, and pay architects. The construction sector experiences immediate demand: workers are hired, suppliers see orders increase, and profits rise.

Meanwhile, the rest of the economy does not yet know that \$100 million in new money has been created. Prices in the broader economy remain unchanged. The early recipients of this new money can purchase assets, hire labor, and acquire resources at existing prices. They gain purchasing power before inflation erodes its value.

Later, as this \$100 million circulates through the economy—workers spend wages, suppliers increase prices—inflation rises. Prices for goods and services increase. The general public, which did not receive any of the newly created money, faces higher costs for the same goods. They have effectively subsidized the profits of those who received the new money first.

This is the **Cantillon Effect**, named after Richard Cantillon, an 18th-century Irish-French economist who first described it. It is a mechanism of wealth transfer embedded in the structure of modern money creation.

In practice, the Cantillon Effect means that those closest to money creation—large corporations with access to bank credit, real estate developers, financial institutions—benefit disproportionately. Small businesses and workers benefit later, if at all, and consumers who do not borrow face erosion of their purchasing power through inflation.

Digital Money and the Velocity Problem

Modern money creation raises another consequence: the velocity of money. Velocity measures how quickly money circulates through the economy. If the money supply increases but velocity declines (people and businesses hold money rather than spend it), inflation may not rise proportionally.

From 2008 to 2020, central banks worldwide created trillions in new money through quantitative easing and low interest rates. The monetary base expanded dramatically. Yet inflation remained subdued in many developed economies. Why? Because much of this new money was captured by financial markets rather than flowing into goods and services. Banks, corporations, and wealthy individuals accumulated financial assets. Velocity declined.

However, during periods of strong lending and economic growth, velocity accelerates. New money flows quickly into wages, spending, and investments. Inflation rises. In recent years (2020-2023), as banks increased lending after pandemic shutdowns, velocity accelerated, and inflation surged.

The key point: money creation does not automatically translate to inflation. The path money takes through the economy, and the velocity at which it circulates, determines its inflationary impact. But over time, persistent money creation without corresponding growth in productive capacity leads to inflation, eroding the purchasing power of savers and fixed-income earners.

Chapter 2: The Big Five Banks and Their Absolute Dominance

The Oligopoly Structure of Canadian Banking

Canada's banking system is among the most concentrated in the world. Five banks control approximately 90% of total banking assets:

1. **Royal Bank of Canada (RBC):** ~\$800 billion in assets. The largest bank by market capitalization.
2. **Toronto-Dominion Bank (TD):** ~\$1.7 trillion in assets (including US operations).

Larger than RBC by asset size.

3. **Bank of Montreal (BMO):** ~\$850 billion in assets.
4. **Scotiabank:** ~\$750 billion in assets.
5. **Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC):** ~\$600 billion in assets.

Combined, these five banks control over \$4 trillion in assets—equivalent to approximately 1.5 times Canada's annual GDP.

This concentration is not unique to Canada, but it is extreme. The United States, with a population roughly 10 times larger, has hundreds of banks, not five dominant institutions. Germany has dozens of major banks. Japan has ten major banking groups. Canada's Big Five structure gives each institution disproportionate market power.

Market Dominance and Political Consequence

The dominance of the Big Five manifests in several ways:

Credit Allocation: Approximately 85% of all business credit in Canada flows through the Big Five. This means five banks decide which industries, companies, and entrepreneurs receive capital. A startup seeking venture capital may approach multiple sources, but a small business seeking a line of credit has few alternatives. If RBC, TD, or CIBC declines to lend, the business faces severely constrained options.

Deposit Concentration: The Big Five hold over 80% of all deposits. Canadians have no practical alternative for everyday banking. While online-only banks and credit unions exist, they are significantly smaller and offer fewer services. For most Canadians, choosing not to bank with one of the Big Five is not a realistic option.

Mortgage Dominance: The Big Five originate approximately 90% of residential mortgages. This gives them extraordinary control over housing markets. If banks decide to tighten lending standards or raise mortgage rates, housing becomes less affordable across the country. If they loosen standards and expand lending, housing demand increases and prices rise.

Policy Influence: The Big Five banks maintain permanent lobbying offices in Ottawa and provincial capitals. They employ dozens of government affairs professionals. Bank executives meet regularly with Finance Minister officials, central bank governors, and regulators. When the Big Five speak, governments listen.

The Five CEOs: Executive Power Without Democratic Accountability

The Big Five are technically owned by millions of shareholders, many of whom are ordinary Canadians with retirement savings. But daily decision-making is concentrated

in the hands of the five CEOs and their executive teams. These individuals are not elected. They answer to boards of directors composed primarily of other corporate executives and retired government officials. They are insulated from public accountability.

The CEOs of the Big Five:

- **Dave McKay (RBC):** Joined RBC in 1989, became CEO in 2015. Compensation: \$14.6 million annually (2023).
- **Bharat Masrani (TD):** Joined TD in 2000, became CEO in 2013. Compensation: \$15.4 million annually (2023).
- **Brian Porter (Scotiabank):** Joined Scotiabank in 2010, became CEO in 2017. Compensation: \$12.9 million annually (2023).
- **Darryl White (BMO):** Joined BMO in 2000, became CEO in 2017. Compensation: \$14.7 million annually (2023).
- **Victor Dodig (CIBC):** Joined CIBC in 2010, became CEO in 2013. Compensation: \$13.5 million annually (2023).

These men earn, on average, \$14 million annually, not including stock options, pension contributions, and other benefits. For context, this is:

- **400 times** the median Canadian household income (~\$35,000)
- **200 times** the average Canadian worker's salary (~\$70,000)
- **1,000 times** the minimum wage in most Canadian provinces (~\$14,000 annually)

Their compensation is justified by the banks as necessary to retain top talent in a competitive global market. But it raises a fundamental question: what creates \$14 million in annual value? In what sense does an executive justify 400 times the median income?

How Banks Really Make Money

Banks generate revenue through:

1. **Net Interest Margin (NIM):** The difference between interest rates charged on loans and paid on deposits. If a bank charges 5% on mortgages but pays 2% on deposits, the 3% spread is the NIM. With trillions in assets, even small margins generate billions in revenue.
2. **Fees:** Overdraft fees, foreign exchange fees, wire transfer fees, mutual fund fees, advisory fees. A customer base of millions generates billions in fee revenue annually.

3. **Investment Banking:** Underwriting stocks and bonds, advising on mergers and acquisitions, managing wealth for high-net-worth clients. These activities generate significant revenue.
4. **Trading:** Banks trade securities, foreign exchange, and derivatives on their own account. In favorable market conditions, this generates substantial profits.

None of this requires creating value in the productive economy. A bank can generate profit by:

- Widening its deposit-loan spread (charging more, paying less)
- Raising fees
- Engaging in speculation

The incentive structure rewards executives for maximizing bank profitability, not for serving the public or funding productive enterprise. This misalignment is fundamental to understanding how banks operate.

The Revolving Door: Banks, Government, and Regulatory Capture

A consistent pattern emerges when examining the careers of banking executives and financial regulators: movement between the financial sector and government positions.

Examples:

- **Tiff Macklem**, current Governor of the Bank of Canada, previously worked at RBC and the IMF.
- **Jennifer Tory**, Executive Vice President at BMO, previously worked in the Canadian Department of Finance.
- **Deputy Ministers of Finance** frequently come from banking backgrounds and return to banking after government service.

This revolving door creates regulatory capture: the industry being regulated staffs the regulatory agencies. Regulators are predisposed to be sympathetic to bank concerns because they may seek employment in banking in the future, or have recently left such employment.

The result is that banking regulation is permissive. Capital requirements, conduct standards, and anti-monopoly rules are set in consultation with banks themselves. Banks effectively write their own rules.

Chapter 3: Executive Compensation and the Misalignment of Incentives

The Compensation Structure: Base Salary, Bonuses, and Stock Options

Each Big Five CEO receives:

- **Base Salary:** \$1.5 – \$2 million
- **Annual Bonus:** \$4 – \$8 million, tied to financial metrics (profit, return on equity, stock price)
- **Stock Options and Long-Term Incentives:** \$7 – \$12 million, vesting over multiple years
- **Pension and Benefits:** \$1 – \$3 million in pension contributions and benefits

The structure heavily emphasizes short-term financial performance and stock price appreciation. A CEO's compensation is maximized when:

1. Bank profits increase (which happens when credit expands and interest margins widen)
2. Stock price rises (which happens when investors expect future profits)
3. Dividends paid to shareholders increase (which requires sustained profitability)

These incentives do *not* reward:

- Prudent lending practices that minimize future defaults
- Long-term economic stability
- Fair treatment of borrowers or customers
- Public welfare

This creates a moral hazard. A CEO who expands lending aggressively, widens spreads, and raises fees will increase short-term profitability and personal compensation. If this strategy leads to a crisis five years later, the CEO may have already received \$70 million in compensation and moved to another position.

The Public Bears the Cost

When banks take excessive risks and crises occur, the public absorbs the losses:

- **2008 Financial Crisis:** Canadian banks required implicit government guarantees (backstopped by taxpayers) to remain solvent, even though Canada's regulatory

system was considered superior to the US. The cost to Canadian taxpayers was tens of billions in contingent liabilities.

- **Mortgage Default Waves:** When a downturn occurs and borrowers default on mortgages, the broader economy suffers: unemployment rises, tax revenues fall, government spending on social programs increases. The public bears the cost of bank lending decisions that turned sour.
- **Inflation:** When banks collectively expand lending excessively, inflation rises. Savers and fixed-income earners (especially retirees) see their purchasing power erode. The bank executives, meanwhile, earned their profits during the expansion phase and are insulated from inflation effects.

Asymmetric Risk: Executives Win, Public Loses

This is not a balanced arrangement. Bank executives enjoy:

- **Upside:** Substantial compensation when banks are profitable and risk-taking succeeds.
- **Limited downside:** Even if personal bets go wrong, they retain accumulated wealth and often remain in high-paying positions.

The public experiences:

- **Limited upside:** As a citizen, you benefit from economic growth, but you do not directly capture the profits from bank expansion.
- **Substantial downside:** As a debtor, you face higher interest rates, fees, and risk of income loss if the economy turns down.

This asymmetry is a feature of the system, not a bug. It ensures that those making decisions have strong incentives to maximize private gain, with little personal exposure to downside risk.

Chapter 4: The Cantillon Effect in Canadian Markets

Housing and Asset Inflation: The Visible Face of Money Creation

The Cantillon Effect manifests most visibly in housing markets. When banks decide to expand mortgage lending, they create new money and new demand for housing simultaneously. Developers and existing homeowners are the first recipients of this new purchasing power. They can acquire or develop property at existing prices, knowing that newly created money will chase housing in the coming months.

Timeline of Housing Inflation and Credit Expansion:

- **2002-2007:** Canadian banks expand mortgage lending aggressively. Prime minister declares Canada has the safest banking system in the world. Housing prices across major cities increase 50-100%.
- **2008-2009:** Crisis hits. Lending contracts. But governments and central banks respond with stimulus and low rates.
- **2009-2019:** Decade of expansion. Mortgage lending resumes. Bank of Canada keeps interest rates near zero. Housing prices double again.
- **2020-2021:** COVID stimulus. Government transfers money directly to households. Banks expand lending to historic levels. Housing prices surge 30-50% in two years.
- **2022-2023:** Central banks raise rates. Lending contracts. Housing prices decline modestly. But early buyers retain gains. Late buyers face higher mortgage payments for the same property.

Who benefits?

- Real estate developers who borrowed early and completed projects before inflation peaked
- Early homebuyers who locked in low prices
- Banks that collected interest and fees on the expansion
- Executives who earned bonuses based on profit growth

Who loses?

- First-time homebuyers entering the market as prices peak, forced to borrow more to afford the same property
- Renters priced out of homeownership
- Savers who held cash while inflation eroded its purchasing power
- Workers whose wage growth lagged inflation

The Cantillon Effect, mediated through the banking system, is a transfer of wealth from later recipients of new money to earlier recipients. It is a hidden tax on the economically vulnerable, a redistribution mechanism that concentrates wealth upward.

Stock Markets and Wealth Concentration

The same mechanism operates in equity markets. When banks and central banks inject

liquidity (create money), asset prices rise. Those who own stocks and bonds benefit disproportionately. Those with few financial assets do not.

Consider the period 2009-2020:

- Central banks globally created trillions in new money through quantitative easing and low interest rates.
- Stock markets worldwide increased 200-300%.
- Wealth inequality increased dramatically.
- A significant fraction of wealth gains accrued to the top 1%, who own the vast majority of stocks and bonds.

Meanwhile, the median household received limited direct benefit. In fact, by holding savings in cash (which lost purchasing power through inflation) or low-yield savings accounts, the median household subsidized the gains of asset owners.

The Debt Trap: How New Money Creation Necessitates More Debt

A subtle but crucial dynamic underlies the entire system: **new money creation requires future debt creation to service interest.**

Example:

- Year 1: Bank creates \$1 million in new money by issuing a loan at 5% interest.
- Year 2: Borrower owes \$50,000 in interest. To pay this, the borrower must either:
 - Reduce consumption elsewhere, or
 - Borrow more money from the bank

If the borrower borrows more, the bank creates additional money to cover the interest on previous debt. This is sustainable as long as the economy grows faster than debt accumulates. But over time, debt compounds, requiring ever-larger money creation simply to service it.

In Canada, total debt (government + corporate + household) is now over \$6 trillion—roughly 2.5 times GDP. Servicing this debt requires a flow of new money creation. The system is caught in a positive feedback loop: more debt → need for more money creation → asset inflation → pressure to borrow more to afford assets → more debt.

At some point, this system reaches a breaking point. When growth slows, new money creation cannot keep pace with interest obligations. Defaults rise, banks tighten lending, recessions occur. The system resets, but not before transferring enormous wealth to

those who benefited from the expansion.

Chapter 5: The Public Pays; The Elite Profit

Mechanism 1: Interest Payments—A Transfer from Debtors to Creditors

Every mortgage, loan, and credit card purchase involves an interest payment. For the Canadian economy, total interest payments dwarf other economic categories.

Approximate annual interest payments:

- **Mortgage interest:** ~\$100 billion annually (paid by households)
- **Corporate debt interest:** ~\$50 billion annually (paid by businesses)
- **Government debt interest:** ~\$30 billion annually (paid from tax revenues)
- **Total:** ~\$180 billion annually

Where does this money go? To banks and bondholders. In the case of banks, interest income flows directly to banks' bottom line, funding executive bonuses and shareholder dividends. In the case of government bonds, interest flows to investors—many of whom are wealthy individuals and institutions.

This \$180 billion represents a massive annual transfer from those who borrow (the economically vulnerable) to those who lend (the financially secure).

Mechanism 2: Inflation Tax—Savers Subsidize Debtors and Banks

When banks create money through lending, inflation often results. Inflation erodes the purchasing power of saved money.

Consider a retiree with \$500,000 in savings in a bank account earning 0.5% interest. If inflation is 3%, the retiree loses 2.5% of purchasing power annually—\$12,500 in this case. Over five years, the loss is substantial.

Who benefits from this inflation tax? Primarily:

- **Borrowers:** A homeowner with a \$500,000 fixed-rate mortgage pays the same nominal amount, but inflation erodes the real value of what they owe.
- **Banks:** Higher inflation allows banks to increase lending rates, widening spreads without increasing the cost of their deposits initially.
- **Asset owners:** Inflation pushes asset prices higher, benefiting those who own real

estate, stocks, and bonds.

The inflation tax is regressive: it falls heaviest on the economically vulnerable (the elderly, savers, wage earners on fixed incomes) and benefits the economically powerful (asset owners, debtors with fixed-rate liabilities, and banks).

Mechanism 3: Fee Extraction—Death by a Thousand Cuts

Beyond interest and inflation, Canadian banks generate enormous profit through fees:

- **Overdraft fees:** ~\$3 billion annually (paid by households that fall briefly negative)
- **Foreign exchange and wire fees:** ~\$2 billion annually
- **Monthly account fees:** ~\$1 billion annually
- **ATM fees:** ~\$500 million annually
- **Mutual fund fees and advisor fees:** ~\$10 billion annually
- **Credit card fees and rewards redemption:** ~\$2 billion annually

Total: approximately \$18-20 billion annually in direct fees from customers. This is not interest or spread—this is pure extracted profit, often from those least able to afford it.

A household struggling to make ends meet, living paycheck to paycheck, is most likely to incur overdraft fees. A recent immigrant unfamiliar with the banking system may overpay for foreign exchange. A retiree seeking investment advice may be steered toward high-fee mutual funds.

Fees are a form of wealth extraction disguised as service charges.

Mechanism 4: Stock Price Appreciation and the Wealth of Executives

The five CEOs of the Big Five banks, along with senior executives and board members, hold substantial stock in their banks:

- **Stock holdings:** Typically \$1-5 million for senior executives
- **Stock price appreciation:** Over the past decade, Big Five bank stocks have increased 2-3x
- **Dividend yields:** Banks typically pay 3-4% annual dividends, adding to returns

An executive who earned stock grants worth \$5 million ten years ago may see that position worth \$12-15 million today, plus having received cumulative dividends of several million more.

This wealth is generated not through innovation or value creation in the productive economy, but through the expansion of credit, fee extraction, and asset inflation driven by money creation. It is captured wealth, not earned wealth.

The Asymmetry Summarized

- **Cost to the public:** \$180 billion in annual interest payments, inflation losses, fees, and opportunity costs from credit constraints. Roughly \$5,400 per Canadian household per year.
- **Benefit to executives:** \$14 million annual compensation, stock appreciation, and pension benefits. Roughly 400 times median income.

This is not a balanced system. It is structured wealth extraction.

Chapter 6: Historical Roots and the Persistence of Banking Power

Medieval Banking to Modern Finance

Banking—the practice of accepting deposits and issuing loans—emerged in medieval Italy, particularly in Florence and Venice. The Medici family's banking enterprise funded the Renaissance and gave the family enormous political power. Florence's rulers answered to the Medici bank.

This pattern repeated: banking families accumulated wealth and power in tandem. The Fuggers of Augsburg financed the Holy Roman Empire. The Bardi and Peruzzi families dominated 14th-century European commerce through banking. In each case, private bankers wielded power that rivaled—and sometimes exceeded—that of monarchs.

The Rothschild Dynasty and the Birth of Modern Central Banking

The most famous banking dynasty emerged in 18th-century Frankfurt: the Rothschilds. The family established branches across Europe—London, Paris, Vienna, Naples—and coordinated international finance during the Napoleonic Wars and beyond.

The Rothschilds' model was revolutionary: centralized decision-making, coordinated capital deployment, and political influence. They financed government bonds, orchestrated currency exchanges, and shaped policy through loans and threats of withholding capital.

By the 19th century, the Rothschilds' banking network was so extensive that economist

John Maynard Keynes observed they wielded more influence than many governments. Their private decisions about credit availability affected employment, prices, and economic stability across Europe.

The Transition from Family Firms to Institutional Banking

By the 20th century, banking dynasties were gradually replaced by institutional banking conglomerates. The shift from family ownership to public shareholding created the appearance of democratization: millions of shareholders, not a single dynasty. But decision-making remained concentrated.

In Canada:

- **The Dominion Bank** (later merged into TD) was founded by Canada's business elite in 1869.
- **Imperial Bank of Canada** (later merged into CIBC) was founded in 1873.
- **Royal Bank of Canada** was founded in 1869, initially as Merchants Bank of Halifax.

These institutions were created by and for Canada's business class—merchants, industrialists, railway barons. Banking existed to serve their capital accumulation needs.

For much of the 20th century, banking was stable and conservative. The era of extreme CEO compensation and aggressive lending came later.

The Deregulation Era: 1980s-2000s

Beginning in the 1980s, Canadian banking underwent significant deregulation:

- **Glass-Steagall equivalents were weakened:** Canadian banks began expanding beyond traditional banking into investment banking, mutual funds, and insurance.
- **Interest rate caps were removed:** Banks could charge whatever rates the market would bear.
- **Capital requirements were eased:** Banks could expand lending relative to their equity base.
- **Executive compensation exploded:** Beginning in the 1990s, CEO compensation in Canadian banks increased 300-500%.

This deregulation coincided with financial innovation: derivatives, mortgage-backed securities, and complex financial instruments that concentrated risk in the banking sector.

The result: a return to the Rothschild model, but mediated through institutional

structures rather than family firms. Concentrated power, outsized compensation, and enormous influence over public policy.

The 2008 Financial Crisis and Lessons Not Learned

When the 2008 crisis hit, Canadian banks survived better than US banks, but primarily due to luck and pre-existing regulations (higher capital requirements), not foresight. The Big Five banks required implicit government guarantees to remain solvent.

Policy response:

- **CMHC expanded:** The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (a government entity) began backing mortgages with even higher loan-to-value ratios, effectively subsidizing bank risk.
- **Bank CEOs retained their positions:** Unlike some US banks, Canadian bank executives escaped consequences.
- **Compensation increased:** After the crisis, CEO compensation at the Big Five continued rising.

No structural reform was implemented. No executive was held accountable. No new regulations fundamentally changed how banks operate.

The lesson: when crises occur, governments bail out banks, preserving the power of executives and shareholders. The system proves resilient to reform because those who control it have the power to prevent change.

Chapter 7: The Structural Consequences of Concentrated Banking Power

Consequence 1: Inequality and Wealth Concentration

The most visible consequence of the banking system is economic inequality. Canada's wealth distribution has become increasingly concentrated:

- **Top 1%:** Owns approximately 25% of all wealth
- **Top 10%:** Owns approximately 60% of all wealth
- **Bottom 50%:** Owns approximately 3% of all wealth

The mechanism is clear: those with access to capital (through banking connections or existing wealth) borrow at favorable rates, invest in assets, and capture gains from asset

inflation. Those without such access face high borrowing costs, cannot invest, and lose purchasing power through inflation.

The banking system is not the sole driver of inequality, but it is a primary mechanism. It concentrates credit allocation in the hands of five institutions, which distribute credit based on creditworthiness (ability to repay, existing collateral) rather than broader social need. This ensures that existing wealth produces more wealth, while those without wealth struggle to access capital.

Consequence 2: Inefficient Capital Allocation

Because the five banks control 90% of credit, capital allocation is based on their risk models and profit incentives, not on social benefit.

Examples of misallocation:

- **Speculative real estate:** In the 2000s and 2010s, enormous credit flowed into residential real estate development and speculation. This inflated housing prices but did not expand productive capacity.
- **Corporate buybacks:** Banks finance corporations' stock buyback programs. These buybacks enrich existing shareholders but do not fund new research, worker training, or productive investment.
- **Short-term projects:** Banks prioritize loans with quick payback periods and clear collateral. Long-term investments in green energy, education, or infrastructure receive less favorable treatment.

The result: capital flows to where banks expect the highest short-term returns, not where society would benefit most.

Consequence 3: Systemic Fragility and Boom-Bust Cycles

The concentration of credit creation in five institutions creates systemic risk. All five use similar risk models, herd toward the same investments, and share exposure to common risks.

Boom-bust dynamics:

1. **Expansion phase:** Banks expand lending aggressively. New money drives up asset prices. Borrowers feel wealthier (wealth effect) and borrow more. The economy appears to boom.
2. **Bubble peak:** Asset prices become disconnected from fundamental values. Debt reaches unsustainable levels. Some borrowers begin defaulting.

3. **Contraction phase:** Banks tighten lending. Money creation slows or reverses. Asset prices fall. The wealth effect reverses. Defaults accelerate.
4. **Crisis:** Credit markets freeze. Credit-dependent businesses fail. Unemployment rises. The public's faith in the financial system wavers.

These cycles are built into the system. They are not anomalies or failures of management; they are inevitable consequences of credit-driven money creation with concentrated decision-making.

Consequence 4: Political Capture and Democratic Erosion

The Big Five banks' influence over political process is substantial:

- **Lobbying expenditure:** ~\$30-40 million annually from the Big Five combined
- **Revolving door:** Dozens of government officials work for banks or vice versa
- **Board representation:** Bank executives sit on government advisory bodies
- **Campaign funding:** While Canadian campaign finance rules limit direct contributions, banks and their executives provide substantial funding

This influence ensures that:

- Proposed regulations are diluted before enactment
- Enforcement is weak or focused on smaller competitors
- Tax policy favors financial sector activities
- Anti-monopoly action is not pursued

Democratic governance requires that elected representatives serve the public interest. When powerful private institutions can shape policy through lobbying and influence, democracy is compromised.

Consequence 5: Environmental and Social Externalities

Bank credit flows toward economically profitable activities, not necessarily toward environmentally or socially beneficial activities.

Examples:

- **Fossil fuel financing:** The Big Five have financed trillions in fossil fuel projects globally, despite climate commitments. Short-term profit motives override long-term environmental concerns.

- **Agricultural consolidation:** Bank credit flows to large industrial agriculture operations, accelerating consolidation and the displacement of small farms.
- **Urban sprawl:** Mortgage lending drives suburban expansion and car dependency, contributing to environmental damage and social isolation.

Banks are not designed to serve environmental or social goals. They are designed to maximize profit. Without strict regulation, this leads to externalities that society bears but banks do not.

Chapter 8: International Perspective—Canada in Global Context

Comparative Bank Concentration

Canada is not unique in having concentrated banking, but the degree of concentration is extreme:

Country	Number of Major Banks	% Assets in Top 5
Canada	5	90%
United States	100+	45%
Germany	30+	40%
France	10+	60%
Australia	4	85%
UK	15+	50%

Canada and Australia stand out for concentration. The US, despite its size, maintains more competitive banking because of historical antitrust enforcement and geographic regulation.

Lessons from Other Systems

Germany's Landesbanken Model:

Germany maintains a diverse banking ecosystem including publicly owned regional banks (Landesbanken), cooperative banks, and savings banks. This limits the power of any single bank and provides alternatives for credit allocation. The trade-off is lower

profitability per institution and lower executive compensation.

Japan's Main Bank System:

In Japan, each large corporation maintains relationships with a "main bank" that provides long-term capital and oversight. This model prioritizes relationship banking and long-term stability over short-term profit maximization.

Nordic Social Democratic Models:

Scandinavian countries maintain more regulated financial systems with stronger labor protections and more generous social safety nets. This reduces inequality and economic fragility, though at the cost of lower financial system profitability.

Why Canada Remains Concentrated

Despite evidence that concentrated banking creates risks and inefficiencies, Canada maintains its oligopolistic structure because:

1. **Path dependency:** The Big Five are deeply embedded in Canadian financial infrastructure. Dislodging them would require massive disruption.
2. **Political capture:** The banks' lobbying power prevents antitrust action.
3. **Shareholder interests:** Current owners of bank stocks benefit from the oligopoly. They have no incentive to support reform.
4. **International capital flows:** Large banks facilitate international trade and capital movements. Smaller institutions cannot match this capability.

Reform would require political will that currently does not exist.

Chapter 9: Reform Possibilities and Alternatives

Option 1: Sovereign Money / Full-Reserve Banking

Model: Only the central bank creates new money. Commercial banks can only lend existing deposits. Money supply grows to match economic growth, not credit cycles.

Mechanics:

- Customers' deposits are held in segregated reserve accounts, fully backed by central bank money or physical reserves.
- Banks operate as intermediaries, matching savers with borrowers, but cannot create

new money through lending.

- Money creation occurs only through the central bank issuing new currency (or digital currency equivalent).

Advantages:

- Eliminates the boom-bust cycle driven by credit creation
- Prevents banks from creating money for speculation
- Allows the public (through democratic processes) to control money supply growth
- Reduces inequality by decoupling money creation from creditworthiness

Disadvantages:

- Requires massive restructuring of the entire financial system
- Would likely reduce the absolute quantity of credit available in the economy initially
- Banks would lose the ability to create money and would become less profitable
- Central bank would gain enormous power over money supply decisions

Political feasibility: Very low. The Big Five banks would oppose this fiercely.

Option 2: Public Credit System and Universal Dividend

Model: Government establishes a public credit system that provides capital to citizens and businesses at below-market rates or zero interest. Citizens receive regular dividend payments from government-created money, distributing gains from money creation.

Mechanics:

- Government (through a new public institution) issues credit for productive purposes: education, green energy, small business.
- Credit is allocated through democratic processes, not through private bank risk models.
- All citizens receive quarterly dividend payments funded by government money creation.

Advantages:

- Democratizes access to capital
- Reduces inequality by distributing money creation gains

- Allows society to prioritize productive investment over speculation
- Reduces dependence on private banks

Disadvantages:

- Requires massive expansion of government administration
- Risk of politicization of credit decisions
- Inflation risk if money creation is excessive
- International finance complications

Political feasibility: Low. Would require major political realignment and rejection of market mechanisms.

Option 3: Decentralized Finance and Cooperative Banking

Model: Expand credit unions and cooperative banks, which are member-owned and operated on non-profit principles. Encourage peer-to-peer lending through blockchain-based systems.

Mechanics:

- Cooperative banks serve specific communities or industries (credit unions, agricultural cooperatives)
- Lending decisions are made by member communities, not distant executives
- Blockchain platforms enable direct lending between individuals without intermediaries
- Multiple competing institutions reduce any single institution's power

Advantages:

- Maintains market mechanisms and competition
- Reduces concentration of power
- Aligns bank interests with member interests
- Can be implemented incrementally without system-wide disruption

Disadvantages:

- Smaller institutions are less efficient at certain functions (international finance, technology investment)

- Requires coordinated expansion that current regulation does not encourage
- Blockchain systems remain experimental and unproven at scale

Political feasibility: Moderate. Would require changes to banking regulations but does not threaten existing players as directly as other options.

Option 4: Executive Compensation and Ownership Reform

Model: Restructure executive compensation to align with public welfare. Require employee ownership or broader shareholder structures.

Mechanisms:

- **Executive pay limits:** Cap CEO compensation at a multiple of the median worker salary (e.g., 20x)
- **Performance metrics:** Tie compensation to long-term stability and social measures, not just profit
- **Employee ownership:** Require banks to be at least 10% employee-owned, with worker representatives on boards
- **Broader shareholding:** Implement policies encouraging pension funds and retail investors to hold bank shares

Advantages:

- Can be implemented within current market structure
- Addresses perverse incentives without eliminating banks
- Builds support by distributing ownership more broadly
- International precedents exist (Germany's co-determination model)

Disadvantages:

- Executives would resist compensation limits
- Difficult to define and measure social welfare metrics
- Market forces might still drive risky behavior
- Does not address fundamental money creation mechanics

Political feasibility: Low to moderate. Would face corporate opposition but could be framed as fairness and risk reduction.

Option 5: Antitrust and Bank Breakup

Model: Enforce antitrust law to reduce bank concentration. Divest the Big Five into smaller, competing institutions.

Mechanics:

- Apply existing Competition Act to challenge Big Five dominance
- Forced sale of major assets to reduce each bank's market share below 20%
- Create 10-15 competing regional banks of similar size
- Maintain separate investment banking and commercial banking (return to Glass-Steagall equivalent)

Advantages:

- Maintains market mechanisms
- Reduces risk concentration
- Increases competition and customer choice
- Forces innovation and efficiency
- Precedent exists (AT&T breakup, Microsoft enforcement)

Disadvantages:

- Reduces economies of scale in banking
- May impair international competitiveness
- Requires sustained political will against corporate opposition
- Does not address fundamental money creation mechanics

Political feasibility: Low. Would face determined industry opposition and geographic complications (Big Five have deep roots in regional economies).

A Pragmatic Path: Incremental Reform

Most transformative reform is unlikely in the near term. A more realistic approach combines incremental measures:

1. **Strengthen regulation:** Increase capital requirements, stress testing, and enforcement
2. **Support alternatives:** Provide regulatory support for credit unions, community

banks, and fintech alternatives

3. **Transparency:** Require detailed public reporting of lending decisions, CEO compensation, and systemic risk measures
4. **Accountability:** Establish mechanisms for holding executives personally liable for criminal or reckless conduct
5. **Democratic engagement:** Educate the public about money creation and banking to build pressure for reform

These measures would not eliminate the Big Five but would reduce their power and address the most harmful incentive misalignments.

Chapter 10: Conclusion—The Path Forward

The Core Reality

Canada's financial system concentrates extraordinary power in the hands of five CEOs and the institutions they lead. This concentration enables:

- **Inefficient capital allocation** based on private profit motives rather than social need
- **Wealth extraction** through interest, fees, and inflation, transferring resources from the vulnerable to the secure
- **Systemic fragility** driven by boom-bust cycles of credit expansion and contraction
- **Political capture** that prevents democratic control of money creation
- **Environmental externalities** resulting from financing fossil fuels and extractive industries

This system is not accidental or inevitable. It is the product of deliberate choices: to deregulate, to encourage executive compensation, to protect bank size through failed antitrust enforcement, and to prioritize financial system profitability over public welfare.

The Challenge of Change

Transforming this system faces substantial obstacles:

- **Entrenchment:** The Big Five have deep roots in Canadian financial infrastructure.
- **Complexity:** Most Canadians do not understand how money is created or how

banks operate. Ignorance is a barrier to reform.

- **Power imbalance:** The banks' lobbying power far exceeds that of reform advocates.
- **International constraints:** Canadian banks operate globally and face competitive pressure that may justify current practices.

Yet change is not impossible. Historical precedent shows that financial systems can be reformed:

- The Great Depression led to the creation of the FDIC and new regulations (though these were eventually weakened).
- Post-World War II, many countries implemented capital controls and financial regulations that lasted decades.
- The Nordic countries maintain different financial models that prioritize stability and distribution over maximum profit.

The Role of Awareness

This book's primary purpose is to illuminate hidden mechanisms. Most Canadians are vaguely aware that "banks are powerful" or "CEOs are overpaid," but do not understand how these realities emerge from money creation itself.

Awareness precedes change. Until the public understands that:

- Money is created as debt by commercial banks
- This process is concentrated in five institutions
- Executives profit enormously while risks are socialized
- Alternative systems are possible

Nothing will change. Banks and their executives will continue operating as they do, justified by theories of market efficiency and competitive necessity.

A Call for Democratic Control

The ultimate question is: who should control money creation?

Currently, the answer is: five private institutions, accountable to no one but their shareholders.

Alternative answers are possible:

- **Central bank:** Expand the Bank of Canada's role to create money directly,

eliminating private money creation.

- **Democratic process:** Create public institutions that allocate credit through democratically-accountable processes.
- **Decentralized competition:** Foster thousands of small credit providers (cooperatives, fintech, peer-to-peer), preventing any single institution from dominating.

Each approach has trade-offs. But all of them would reduce inequality, increase stability, and ensure that money creation serves public purposes, not private profits.

Final Words

Canada is not a poor country. It is not constrained by insufficient resources or capital. The constraint is structural: the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a few individuals who profit from the current system.

Breaking this constraint will require:

1. **Knowledge:** Understanding how money creation works and how it is currently concentrated.
2. **Discourse:** Public debate about alternatives, unencumbered by bank-funded think tanks.
3. **Organization:** Coalition-building among those harmed by the current system.
4. **Political pressure:** Electing officials who prioritize reform over banking industry preferences.

This will not happen quickly. Reform faces determined opposition from those who benefit from the status quo. But the momentum toward awareness is growing. More people recognize that the current system is failing them—that houses are unaffordable, that wages stagnate, that debt is inescapable.

The Big Five banks have engineered a system of extraordinary wealth concentration. They have justified it through theories of market efficiency and executive necessity. They have defended it through lobbying and political capture.

The system is working exactly as designed. The only question is whether Canadians will demand something different.

Epilogue: Questions for Reflection

As you finish this book, consider these questions:

1. **Money creation:** Now that you understand money is created by commercial banks as debt, does this change how you view your own mortgage or student loan?
2. **Power:** Knowing that five individuals influence where trillions in capital flows, do you feel that you have meaningful control over your financial life?
3. **Inequality:** Understanding the mechanisms through which wealth concentrates upward, do you view inequality differently?
4. **Alternatives:** If you had to design a different financial system, what principles would you prioritize? Democratic control? Efficiency? Stability? Equality?
5. **Change:** What would need to happen for significant financial reform to occur in Canada? What role, if any, do you see for yourself in that process?

These questions have no single correct answer. But grappling with them is the first step toward understanding that alternatives are possible—that the current system is not inevitable, but chosen.

Appendix: Key Terms and Concepts

Asset Inflation: Rising prices of assets (real estate, stocks, bonds) driven by increased credit and money creation. Assets become more expensive even if productivity or utility does not increase.

Bank Capital: The equity (shareholder funds) that banks use to absorb losses. Higher capital ratios mean banks are safer but earn lower returns on equity.

Cantillon Effect: The process by which early recipients of newly created money benefit from price stability while later recipients face inflation. Named after Richard Cantillon, an 18th-century economist.

Conditional Loss Absorption (TLAC): An international regulatory standard requiring banks to maintain sufficient loss-absorbing capacity to handle stress without government bailouts. However, enforcement remains weak.

Deposit Insurance: Government insurance (in Canada, provided by CDIC) that protects depositors if a bank fails. Creates moral hazard by reducing incentives for banks to operate prudently.

Fractional Reserve Banking: A historical term for banking systems where banks hold a small reserve (fraction) of deposits and lend out the rest. Technically inaccurate for

Canada, where banks have no statutory reserve requirement.

Leverage: The ratio of debt to equity. High leverage means a small percentage decline in assets wipes out all equity. Banks are highly leveraged (typically 10:1 to 20:1).

Money Multiplier: The amount by which money supply increases due to bank lending. In a pure fractional reserve system with a 10% reserve requirement, the multiplier is 10. In modern systems, the multiplier is unstable and poorly understood.

Monetary Base: The money directly issued by the central bank (physical currency plus reserves held by commercial banks at the central bank). Represents only 3-5% of total money supply.

Monetary Policy: Central bank actions to influence interest rates and money supply. Primarily conducted through interest rate adjustments and quantitative easing.

Net Interest Margin: The difference between interest rates charged on loans and paid on deposits. A primary source of bank profit.

Regulatory Capital: The equity banks must maintain relative to their risk-weighted assets. Determined by Basel III standards and enforced by regulators.

Risk-Weighted Assets: A method of adjusting bank assets for risk, with safer assets (government bonds) having lower weights and riskier assets (subprime mortgages) having higher weights. Used to calculate capital requirements.

Stress Test: A regulatory exercise requiring banks to demonstrate they could survive a severe recession or financial crisis. Tests in Canada are criticized as too lenient.

Systemic Risk: Risk that failure of one institution triggers failure of others, threatening the entire financial system. The Big Five banks represent systemic risk because their failure would cascade through the economy.

Appendix: Shocking Facts About Canadian Banking

- **Money Creation:** Approximately 97% of money in the Canadian economy is created by commercial banks through lending, not by the government or central bank.
- **CEO Compensation:** The average CEO of the Big Five earns approximately \$14 million annually—400 times the median Canadian household income. This increased 500% over the past 30 years while worker wages stagnated.
- **Credit Concentration:** The Big Five banks control 90% of commercial credit. A business seeking a bank loan has almost no alternative if one of the Big Five declines

to lend.

- **Mortgage Dominance:** The Big Five originate approximately 90% of residential mortgages, giving them extraordinary control over housing affordability.
 - **Deposit Concentration:** The Big Five hold over 80% of all deposits. Most Canadians have no practical alternative for everyday banking.
 - **Interest Extraction:** Annual interest payments across the Canadian economy total approximately \$180 billion—a massive transfer from debtors to creditors, primarily banks.
 - **Fee Extraction:** The Big Five extract approximately \$18–20 billion annually in fees from customers, often from those least able to afford them.
 - **Systemic Risk:** The Big Five represent such concentrated systemic risk that government bailout in a crisis is guaranteed, subsidizing their recklessness.
 - **Executive Equity:** Bank executives hold large equity positions in their employers, creating incentives to maximize short-term stock price appreciation even at the cost of systemic stability.
 - **Regulatory Capture:** Movement between banking and government positions is common, creating weak regulation and favorable policy for the banking industry.
 - **Wealth Concentration:** The share of wealth held by Canada's top 1% has increased from 20% (1980s) to 25% (2020s), driven partly by banking system concentration and asset inflation.
 - **Inequality by Mechanism:** The banking system is a primary mechanism through which wealth concentrates upward through deposit creation, interest extraction, fee collection, and asset inflation.
-

Appendix: Recommended Further Reading

Books:

- *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* by Naomi Klein—How financial system changes are implemented through crises
- *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* by David Graeber—Historical perspective on money and debt
- *The Money Illusion* by Irving Fisher—Classic economic analysis of money and inflation

- *Killing the Host: How Financial Parasites and Debt Bondage are Destroying the Global Economy* by Michael Hudson—Critical analysis of banking and debt
- *Fiat Money Inflation in France* by Andrew Dickson White—Historical case study of money creation and inflation

Academic Papers and Reports:

- Bank of Canada Monetary Policy Reports (quarterly analyses of money supply and economic conditions)
- Financial Stability Reports from OSFI (Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions)
- Research papers on the Cantillon Effect and money creation mechanisms
- IMF reports on financial system concentration in developed economies

Online Resources:

- Bank of Canada website: www.bankofcanada.ca (annual reports, policy statements)
- Big Five Banks investor relations pages (annual reports, financial statements, executive compensation details)
- CIBC Economics reports (economic analysis and commentary)
- Positive Money Canada (advocacy organization focused on banking reform)
- Royal Canadian Institute for Economic Policy (independent economic research)

Author's Note

This book represents research and analysis informed by economic literature, financial reports, and publicly available data. It is not an academic text with formal citations, though each claim is supported by publicly available evidence.

The argument is systemic, not personal. Individual bank executives are not villains; they operate within a system that rewards and incentivizes their behavior. The system itself—concentrated credit creation, alignment of executive compensation with profit maximization, weak democratic control of money creation—is the problem that requires reform.

Reform is possible. History shows that financial systems can be restructured. The question is whether public awareness and political pressure will demand it.

© 2026 Marie-Soleil Seshat Landry

A text for public education and democratic engagement.

END OF BOOK