OTTAWA CITIZEN DIGITAL

Broken heartland

Ontarians have long considered their province synonymous with Canada. 'Nobody ever said, 'I'm an Ontarian,' ' one former premier says. But as the country's premiers meet this week, the backdrop is a wrenching economic transformation that heralds dramatic changes for Confederation. As Don Butler reports, Ontario is ready to start putting 'Ontario first.'

Don Butler

Saturday, July 12, 2008

CREDIT: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen

Several years ago, the Timminco magnesium mine and foundry employed more than 500 people. The furnaces operated 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Jamie Ferguson, Bob Kelly and Doug Zimmerling are among the last 25 employees, and when the plant shuts down later this summer, their jobs will vanish, and Renfrew County will lose that rarity -- well-paid union jobs. One of Mr. Kelly's last projects will be to strip the foundry of its equipment and prepare it for shipment to Mexico.

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When Heather MacIvor moved to Windsor in 1992, the city was weathering its third year of recession. But there was no panic; people in Canada's auto capital were used to economic cycles. "Everyone was just hanging around, waiting, because they knew it was going to turn around," she says. "And it did."

Today, as jobs evaporate in Ontario's auto sector, there's a much different mood, says Ms. MacIvor, a political scientist at the University of Windsor.

"I didn't need Statistics Canada to tell me this is pretty much the only market in the country where house prices are falling. The 'for rent' signs are everywhere, the 'for sale' signs are everywhere."

People are walking away from their homes, she says. "The vultures are circling around this town. That's how it feels."

Ms. MacIvor was born in Nova Scotia. "We all knew growing up that we were probably going to have to move elsewhere. But folks who were born in Essex County, Ont., never, ever wanted to leave, or thought about leaving."

That, too, is changing. People who assumed there would always be work for their children are bidding them adieu at Windsor's airport. The city's mayor wants WestJet to start direct flights to Fort McMurray so Windsorites can work in the Alberta boomtown and commute home on weekends.

"Now there is this huge trauma in this society," Ms. MacIvor says. "I keep being reminded of the Springsteen song, My Hometown -- 'Foreman says these jobs are going, boys, and they ain't coming back.' That is the sense here."

But 370 kilometres east on Highway 401, there are few signs of gloom. Though Toronto was home to about half of the 200,000 manufacturing jobs that have disappeared in Ontario in the past four years, the city's economy is large and diversified enough to absorb the loss.

"This ain't Windsor," says former Ontario premier David Peterson from his office at King and Bay streets. His law firm is doing a roaring business, he says. "Nobody around here is feeling a recession."

Nelson Wiseman doesn't see the downturn either. "I can't believe the price of condos all around me," the University of Toronto political scientist marvels. "The former chair of the Bank of Montreal just bought one across the street from me for $15 million."

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Timothy Meighen, who lost his job at the auto-parts manfacturer Trimag, is convinced retraining is the only way to avoid low-paying jobs at the Wal-Mart and Staples stores that have opened in the past year: 'I want to get a career, I don't want a job.'

The differences between the two cities don't alter the fact that Ontario's economy is going through major structural changes, with profound implications for the Canadian federation. But as the provincial premiers gather this week in Quebec City for their annual meeting, whether those changes are even visible depends very much on where you live, and what you do.

The Damage Done

At the end of this month, Jamie Ferguson, Bob Kelly and Doug Zimmerling will become the latest casualties of the forces remaking Ontario's economic landscape.

For 32 years, the three have earned good livings in Renfrew County at Timminco Ltd.'s magnesium foundry, a mainstay of the local economy for generations. At its peak, more than 500 people worked at the plant and adjacent mine, producing lightweight metal products fashioned from the world's purest magnesium.

"You couldn't find a parking spot," recalls Mr. Ferguson, the 51-year-old president of Unit 16 of the United Steelworkers Union. "We actually got into growling matches to get locker space."

The foundry's furnace floor -- 18 furnaces in a building the length of four football fields -- operated 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, keeping four daily shifts of 24 men each busy. "You were in a business that didn't stop," says Mr. Kelly, 55, a burly man with a shock of white chin whiskers. "It was 'round the clock. Christmases and everything, guys worked."

The furnaces fell silent several years ago. Finding parking spots and locker space hasn't been a problem for a long time. Just 25 men, including Mr. Ferguson, Mr. Kelly and Mr. Zimmerling, still work at the Timminco foundry. And their jobs will vanish when the company shuts the plant Aug. 1.

With it goes that rarity in Renfrew County -- well-paid union jobs. The average wage at Timminco is around $22 an hour, plus benefits. "When you lose your benefits, what the hell do you do?" asks Mr. Kelly, who was union president before Mr. Ferguson. "Do you go to a $10-an-hour job with no benefits? How the hell do you survive?"

There's still plenty of high-grade magnesium ore in the mine -- an 80-year supply, according to Mr. Kelly. But a few years ago, the company started to import magnesium from China and Russia. It was poorer in quality, but cost a third as much.

Eventually, Timminco stopped extracting the ore. Since then, the price of magnesium has soared. "If somebody came in there and modernized what they have," Mr. Ferguson insists, "it could be a competitive mine."

But that's not the plan. Timminco has moved some of its manufacturing operations to Mexico. One of Mr. Kelly's last jobs is to strip one of the foundry buildings. "Every piece of equipment is being put on a trailer. I mean the wiring, the pipes, the emergency lights. It's going to Mexico," he says indignantly. "They're going to reassemble it. Our plant is going to be there."

Most of the remaining Timminco workers have spent their lives at the foundry. "They worked in that place through thick and thin," Mr. Ferguson says in the Steelworkers Hall in Renfrew. "I wish them all the best; they've been a great group. I hope they all find jobs," he says, voice trailing off.

It won't be easy. The average age of the remaining Timminco workers is 56. Many lack even a high school education. "Nobody will hire you without a Grade 12," Mr. Kelly says flatly.

For most, early retirement isn't an option. Pensions taken before age 65 are reduced by six per cent a year. For Mr. Kelly, that amounts to a 60-per-cent cut. "You don't have much choice other than to get the hell out and go back to work."

Some of the younger Timminco workers, laid off a few years ago, have landed good jobs at Haley Industries, just down Magnesium Road from the foundry. A lucky few have caught on at AECL in Chalk River, 90 minutes from Renfrew. But others have had to take big pay cuts. Some are on welfare.

Many of the available jobs are in Northern Ontario, where the resource boom has created a demand for labour. Some people fly in, work at a mine for two weeks, and return home for two weeks before repeating the pattern. "It's stuff a lot of us will be looking at," Mr. Kelly says. "I will, anyways. I'd like to get four or five years' more work."

Mr. Zimmerling, 49, is a licensed millwright and machinist. But even machinist jobs are scarce in the Renfrew area -- he'd likely have to go to Northern Ontario. "With three kids at home, even two weeks at a time, it's not real practical."

Mr. Ferguson also has three children, ages 15, 13 and 11. He's resigned to having to move. He's hoping to find a job in Ottawa representing injured workers.

All three are angry. At greedy shareholders who are destroying their jobs for a few pennies more profit. At their fellow citizens for chasing bargains at the expense of Canadian jobs. But most of all at government.

"The bottom line is, our jobs are gone because of China," fumes Mr. Kelly. "The government did nothing to help us. They let us hang out to dry." Canadians, he says, are too complacent.

"Everything's going, folks. They're not going to be here. So figure it out."

A Very Peculiar Flu

By now, the auto industry's struggles are well known. Employment has fallen by 30,000 since 2001, and now sits at about 125,000. And that's "not remotely the bottom," says Jim Stanford, an economist with the Canadian Auto Workers union. "We will lose another 10,000 jobs at least in the next year."

The auto sector accounts for 10 per cent of all Ontario manufacturing and 35 per cent of the value of its exports. But even that grossly understates its importance to Ontario's economy, Mr. Stanford contends. Another 7.5 jobs -- about half of them in manufacturing -- depend on each job at a major auto plant, he says.

And it's not just the auto industry. Most of Ontario's traditional manufacturing base is under siege. In the first four months of this year, sales are down nine per cent from the same period last year, and the value of exports has fallen by 14.3 per cent. The weakness is across the board, with the plastics, metals and forestry industries all posting larger declines than the auto sector in the past two years.

Though manufacturing's share of employment has been falling for years, it still accounts for about 14 per cent of all jobs in Ontario and 18 per cent of the province's gross domestic product.

The current slump, along with parallel struggles in the tourism sector, has started to bite. Ontario's economy shrank by 0.3 per cent in the first quarter, and most experts expect it to grow little, if at all, this year. The provincial economy may not be terminally ill, says Don Drummond, chief economist of the Toronto-Dominion Bank, but "it's certainly got a cold or the flu."

But it's a very peculiar flu. Even as the provincial economy has been shedding manufacturing jobs, employment has grown, driven by an exploding public sector and robust growth in financial services and construction.

There were 560,000 more people working in the province in May than in November 2002, when manufacturing employment peaked. In 2007 alone, the provincial economy added 101,000 net new jobs, and has produced a further 81,000 so far this year.

Ontario's unemployment rate didn't surpass the national average until last year and even now stands just slightly higher. Until this year, economic growth has been solid. Average weekly earnings have continued to rise.

What Ontario's going through now, says Douglas Porter, the Bank of Montreal's deputy chief economist, is nothing compared the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s.

"Private-sector employment in the province is actually up in the last 12 months, whereas it would have dropped by seven or eight per cent in about the space of a year in the early '90s and early '80s," he says. "Up to this point, at least, the economy's held up remarkably well."

Yet Ontario's struggles are unlike those of the past. As former provincial cabinet minister Sean Conway puts it, "this has the feel of something more transformational."

In part, that's because most of the forces driving change are structural -- things such as the value of the dollar, energy prices and competition from low-wage emerging economies.

But it's also because this time, Ontario's decline is more relative than real. The energy-producing provinces are leaving Canada's ostensible economic engine in the dust. "At $150 (per barrel) oil," says Tom Courchene, director of the Institute of Intergovernmental Relations at Queen's University, "the economic capital of Canada is certainly in the West somewhere."

To Have and Have Not

The signs of Ontario's relative decline are easy to find. In 2006, the province's gross domestic product per person -- a common way to assess relative prosperity -- slipped below the national average for the first time. It sunk almost $1,000 below the national average in 2007, and is projected to slide further this year.

Alberta long ago surpassed Ontario's GDP per capita and now sits nearly $30,000 higher than the traditional heartland by that measure. Saskatchewan passed Ontario in 2005. Two years ago, Newfoundland and Labrador -- Newfoundland and Labrador! -- shot past as well. GDP per capita on The Rock is now nearly $12,000 higher than in Ontario.

As well, average income in Ontario has been drifting toward the national average for several years. "If our forecast is right," says Mr. Drummond, "it could well go even below the national average in 2010."

Ontario sits dead last among all provinces when it comes to government revenues and spending per capita. As Mr. Peterson points out, provincial governments have two major areas of responsibility -- health and education -- and Ontario's spending per capita is at the bottom in both.

While nearly half of all immigrants still settle in Ontario, last year 36,000 more people left for greener pastures elsewhere in Canada than moved here from another province.

Perhaps the biggest symbol of Ontario's relative decline is that it could soon start collecting equalization payments, which the federal government sends to "have-not" provinces. Ironically, it's happening just as that traditional indigent, Newfoundland and Labrador, is about to move off equalization for the first time.

Ontario could qualify for equalization as early as next year, the TD Bank says. Even if it doesn't, it stands to collect $400 million in 2010 and $1.3 billion in 2011, the bank says.

It's a humbling proposition for Canada's ostensible heartland, not made easier by Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams' gleeful offer to help Canada's "weaker sisters."

It wouldn't be the first time Ontario has qualified for equalization, though. It did so between 1977 and 1982, for much the same reason -- soaring energy prices. But Ontario's then-premier, Bill Davis, wouldn't accept the money. The formula was later changed to retroactively disqualify the province.

Mr. Peterson says Ontario's impending shift to have-not status "doesn't mean anything. It's really a function of an arcane formula that no longer makes sense."

That's probably true, just as the province's relative decline has more to do with other parts of the country getting richer than Ontario getting poorer.

But that's cold comfort to someone whose job is disappearing.

Moving On

Timothy Meighen knows what the Timminco workers are going through. Last January, the 45-year-old father of five was laid off from his job as a die-cast technician at Trimag, an auto-parts plant across the road from the Timminco foundry. The 12-year-old plant closed in March when the owner decided to consolidate operations in Boisbriand, Que. About 100 people lost unionized jobs paying between $20.80 and $24 an hour.

"Initially, a lot of the guys took it hard," Mr. Meighen says at an action centre for laid-off Trimag workers on Renfrew's main drag, Raglan Street, where he works one day a week. Trimag had been through three or four ownership changes, he says. "They thought they'd seen the bad times, and the good times were ahead."

There was anger, and of course, fear. "That's the natural reaction," he says. "You start thinking, 'What am I going to do?"

Since then, though, attitudes have begun to shift, he says. "I think there might be some hope. They see a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel." That's because, three months after the closing, "we might have only 40 people still without work, which is excellent."

It helps that the Trimag employees were, on average, in their early 30s. Even so, most of those who have found work have taken a significant pay cut -- $4 to $5 an hour on average. And most have to commute to their new jobs.

Manufacturing jobs around Renfrew are almost non-existent, Mr. Meighen says. "Or if they do exist, they want to pay $10 an hour. Good-paying union jobs are becoming a thing of the past."

Mr. Meighen, who worked in restaurants for 20 years before catching on at Trimag in 2005, is thinking about returning to school to get training as a dietitian. He admits the prospect scares him. "I was 22 when I was in college," he says, "so it's a long time between classes."

But he's convinced that retraining offers the only alternative to low-paying jobs at the Wal-Mart and Staples stores that have opened in the past year. "I want to get a career," he says emphatically. "I don't want a job."

Kathleen Rogers, the action centre's co-coordinator, talks up that message to the laid-off workers. "There is some hope for the future," she says. "You just have to kind of get your head wrapped around it."

China, The Dollar and Oil, Oh My!

More than 83 per cent of Ontario's exports go to the United States, so the recession under way there is certainly resposible for part of the province's current malaise. That's actually good news: as the American economy rebounds, beleaguered Ontario exporters should feel some relief.

Unfortunately, a host of interrelated structural changes are playing even larger roles.

A key one is the exchange rate. The rise of the Canadian dollar has obliterated the competitive advantage that Ontario industries had when the currency was worth 65 cents U.S. That has "unwound decades of infrastructure" in Ontario, says Mr. Courchene, who argues for a common currency with the U.S. to introduce certainty for investors.

Not coincidentally, Ontario's manufacturing sector expanded when the dollar was low, even as it declined in every other industrialized nation. "In many respects," says the TD Bank's Drummond, "we had a delusional decade in the 1990s."

Mr. Stanford believes a fair value for the dollar is around 81 cents U.S. "If the dollar fell to that level, we'd once again have a significant labour cost advantage compared to the U.S."

But few expect the dollar to fall that far. In fact, there were predictions this week it could rise as high as $1.10 U.S. by next year. That's because the loonie's strength has been largely driven by soaring prices for commodities, especially oil. High oil prices mean a double-whammy for Ontario, jacking up both the dollar and costs for the province's manufacturers. "Everything that's working for the rest of the country is working against us," laments Mr. Peterson.

While oil prices may drop temporarily, there's little sign they'll stabilize at significantly lower levels. That's partly due to a third major structural change hitting Ontario -- the emergence of low-wage competitors such as China, India and other developing economies.

Again, this poses multiple challenges for Ontario. Low wages in emerging economies increasingly mean Ontario manufacturers can't compete. And growing demand for oil and other resources, especially from China, ensures commodity prices will remain high, inflating the dollar's value.

Ontario's location adjacent to the world's largest market should be its ace in the hole. But since the 9/11 attacks, the border has become far less permeable. "If you can't get that product across the border into that big U.S. market," says Mr. Drummond, "you're a bit toast."

Then there's the impact of a something few ever talk about -- demographic change. In Ontario, as in other industrialized economies, it's all about the aging population.

According to University of Toronto demographer David Foot, aging occurs when societies educate women and fertility rates fall. When women have a lot of children, there are more mouths to feed and agriculture flourishes. As fertility rates fall, there's a bulge of people in their 20s and 30s in the population -- the prime goods-buying years. So industries arise that can supply those goods.

The next transition occurs as more of the population moves into their 40s and 50s, Mr. Foot says. They've already bought most of their manufactured goods. What they need are services -- things like financial planning, travel and health care.

"That's the transition Ontario's been going through," Mr. Foot says. Services now account for more than 72 per cent of Ontario's economy.

The province would have seen the same trends even if oil prices, the exchange rate and China weren't factors, Mr. Foot says. "They may have been a little less severe, a little less abrupt. But the inevitable aging of the population underneath the economy gradually and slowly makes these things happen."

A Heartland Transplant

If "the heartland is no more," as Tom Courchene maintains, what effect will that have on Ontario's role and influence within Canada?

In raw electoral terms, little has changed. Ontario still has nearly 40 per cent of the population, more than the Western provinces combined. That's a voting bloc any federal party can ill afford to ignore.

Perhaps the biggest shift -- one that was under way even before Ontario's current troubles began -- has to do with the way Ontarians relate to Canada. "Ontario historically is the only province without a sense of regionalism," Mr. Peterson says. "Nobody ever said, 'I'm an Ontarian.'"

That's because Ontario has tended to see itself as congruent with Canada, to the frequent fury of other parts of the country. "We just assumed that anything Canada did would be good for Ontario," Mr. Courchene says. "But that's no longer the case."

One of the liberating things about Ontario's status change, he says, is that federal MPs from Ontario "will become more Ontario-first. That's going to have a big impact on the system."

The province, too, will act more forcefully in its own interest. That's already happening, says Roger Gibbins, president and CEO of the Calgary-based Canada West Foundation. "It's becoming a more contentious, more difficult player within the federation."

But Ontarians still have a ways to go, according to the University of Calgary's Barry Cooper. "The self-understanding of Ontario has been that the St. Lawrence Valley is basically Canada," he says. "That self-understanding has to catch up with reality, and I haven't seen that yet."

Mr. Courchene sees last month's joint meeting of the Ontario and Quebec cabinets as a response to Alberta's rise to economic dominance. "These are people who have similar interests," he says. "They're both manufacturing economies. They're in the centre, they're large, they control the voting power of the system. It's a natural fit."

The alliance is also a message to the federal government that it can't use Central Canada as a whipping boy, says Mr. Peterson, who accuses Prime Minister Stephen Harper of treating Ontario's economic problems as a tactical issue.

"Any serious prime minister from any province should be thinking deeply about the corrosion in mid-Canada," he says. "So far he has decided to be very adversarial. It's very distressing."

Others see another positive in the Ontario-Quebec alliance. "It's the first time in a long time that the division in Canada is not 'rest of Canada versus Quebec,'" Mr. Courchene says. "That's a healthy situation."

Mr. Gibbins says Ontario's struggles have exploded the myth that Canada has a genuine national economy. Still, when things go soft in the centre, he says, "the economic management of the country becomes really very difficult."

For one thing, programs such as equalization, which have relied on Ontario's bedrock economic strength to spread wealth across the country, become problematic, he says. "When that falters, it's not clear how we address growing inequities in wealth."

You can't use the normal tax system, he says. "There simply aren't enough taxpayers in Alberta and Saskatchewan."

The alternative -- tapping into revenues from provincially owned resources -- would be deeply divisive. The hostile reaction in Western Canada to Stéphane Dion's proposed carbon tax offers a mild preview of that, Mr. Gibbins says.

All of which leads him to pose a question that may best sum up the political meaning of Ontario's decline: "How do you hold a country together when the national economy dissolves?"

The Road Ahead

How bad could it get for Ontario in the years ahead? For those who work in manufacturing, the answer is: a lot worse.

"We might only be in the middle innings of the job losses in manufacturing," says the Bank of Montreal's Douglas Porter. A TD Bank report in February projected that if factory jobs as a share of total employment fall to current levels in the U.S., Britain and Australia, Ontario would lose a further 250,000 jobs over the next five years.

If nothing changes, says the CAW's Jim Stanford, "there's no inherent reason why there should be a single auto plant left in Canada in 20 years."

Some, like David Foot, are unperturbed by such prospects, arguing that the evolution away from manufacturing is inevitable and the expanding service sector is producing plenty of jobs, many of them well-paid. "I don't want to minimize the importance that manufacturing has played in the past," he says. "But the growth of the manufacturing sector is not critical to the growth of per-capita incomes in the future."

But Mr. Porter argues that a strong manufacturing base is key to any successful economy. "If that sector's under pressure, then eventually all the sectors that are related to your main exporting sector will suffer as well."

Ontario won't wither away if manufacturing employment continues to slide, Mr. Stanford concedes. But its ability to generate well-paid jobs -- "not just for yuppies," he sneers, "but your average bloke" -- will be fundamentally compromised if nothing is done.

Most experts agree that Ontario's future prosperity lies in leveraging its considerable assets -- an educated population, world-class research centres, vibrant biotech and high-tech sectors -- to "move up the value curve," as Mr. Drummond puts it. That will require a high degree of innovation. In other words, the much-discussed knowledge economy.

But there are several problems with that, starting with the hard fact that everyone else is trying to do the same thing. "What's unprecedented," says Mr. Drummond, "is that the emerging economies are going up very high on the value-added curve themselves." Low-skilled jobs in China, for example, are already shifting to cheaper countries like Vietnam and Malaysia.

Even two apparent Ontario strengths -- education and immigration -- may be less than they seem.

Though Ontario has one of the world's highest participation rates in post-secondary education, "we've got a low rate of graduate degrees," says Mr. Peterson, who also serves as chancellor of the University of Toronto.

And while immigrants will provide most of Ontario's future labour-force growth, Mr. Drummond points out that they increasingly are falling into low-income jobs and staying there. That's actually lowering productivity, he says. "Part of it's that I think there are elements of intolerance in the society. The people who are coming in with great credentials on paper just are not getting the jobs."

And there's more. Historically, Ontario's industrial structure was built on subsidized electricity, Mr. Drummond notes. But the province's existing electricity-generation capacity is aging, and 80 per cent of it must be replaced by 2017. So not only will industrial users no longer get subsidized power, they might have trouble getting power at all.

Despite the challenges, many believe the province will muddle through, and could even emerge from the current transition stronger than ever.

"Ontario, if you look at the sweep of its history, has proven to be a very resilient and adaptive economy," says Sean Conway. He cites the example of Sudbury, where he spent a winter 30 years ago. "Literally overnight they lost thousands of jobs. Inco and Falconbridge laid off 8,000 to 10,000 people. Everybody thought, oh my God, it's the death knell for Sudbury."

Today, Sudbury is thriving, riding the commodities boom. But its economy has been transformed, Mr. Conway says. "You've got a lot of specialized mining-related services, with college and university graduates developing and delivering highly specialized services."

Mr. Foot believes Ontario will be richer than ever. "I think we're the envy of the world," he says. "In general, we're extremely well-prepared for the future."

But others, like Heather MacIvor, are more pessimistic. "The people who are in charge of things are like generals re-fighting the last war," she says. "They certainly haven't learned anything from recent history."

If Ontario hopes to get its economic groove back, "we're not going to do it just by sticking to what we've been doing for the last century or century and a half," Ms. MacIvor says. "Because that's not working any more."

Final Word

Back at the Steelworkers Hall, Jamie Ferguson is ruminating on the broader meaning of the economic changes about to claim him as a victim.

"I do the pyramid thing, and we're at the bottom," he begins. "All of a sudden, they turn around and cut our jobs. And why do they cut the jobs? Well, they cut the jobs because they want more profit.

"But what people have forgotten is, you know what? We're the buying public. Sooner or later, the shareholder isn't going to get the money on their shares, because we're not going to be able to buy their damn product. And we're going to become one of those countries that have nothing."

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Ontario's Economy by the Numbers

30,000: The number of jobs lost in the auto sector since 2001

101,000: The number of net new jobs added to economy in 2007

14%: The percentage of manufacturing's share of provincial jobs

915,500: The number of manufacturing jobs in May 2008

954,500: The number in May 2007

5.2: The number of service-sector jobs in May 2008

6.4%: The unemployment rate in Ontario in May 2008

4.1%: The unemployment rate in Saskatchewan

3.6%:The unemployment rate in Alberta

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