



Towards a New LIBERALISM

RE-CREATING CANADA AND THE LIBERAL PARTY

MORE THAN 40 THOUGHTFUL AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING ESSAYS ON THE
CRISIS THAT FACES THE CANADIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM IN THE 1990S.

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A Crisis of Leadership

Deborah Coyne

What has happened to public discourse in Canada? Where are the poets, the F.R. Scotts, of the 1990s? Can our leaders no longer transmit a vision of Canada that captures the essence of our nation and provides us with fundamental principles to guide our collective future? Are we destined to end the twentieth century with a timid whimper, having allowed corporate thinking, corporate frames of reference and the language of materialism to snuff out the intangible, inspirational element of nationhood and all sense of shared purpose and goals?

In recent years, with the fixation on the magic of the market place, many of our political leaders have capitulated to corporate forces, viewing government as a business and running the country as primarily the pursuit of the bottom line. This, as social theorist Ralf Dahrendorf notes in a perceptive interview with *New Perspectives Quarterly* (1990), has led to a severe weakening of our civil society — the essential space between the individual and the state. “The market as economists see it is quite uncivil because it assumes that the actors are only isolated individuals . . . There is no such thing as society, only individuals and governments.”

Any economic theory of democracy or view of society such as practised by modern conservative governments then has dire consequences for the health of the nation. If it prevails, “then the autonomy of institutions between the state and the individual will be left unprotected, leading to their disruption. In the end, you won’t have universities as places of teaching and research, but as appendices of economic growth; you won’t have the arts as media of human expression and enjoyment, but as commerce, entertainment or advertising . . . The problem is not the market as such, but the growth obsession of the West in recent times. When the growth orientation prevails over redistributive concerns, we end up with a significant minority, even an underclass, that is excluded in

substantive terms from full citizenship rights as participants in society. Any society that follows this path will end up as an unjust society."

Our current government, like that of Margaret Thatcher in Dahrendorf's analysis, is helping to destroy Canada's civil society with the instrumentation of state. Canada is a young, immense country stretching from coast to coast to coast. The symbols of unity and sense of purpose have been painstakingly built up for over a century and have never reflected economic logic. Institutions such as the CBC, the railway network, the public airline, universal social programs, are all essential to a sense, however fragile, of national identity. But one by one these and other institutions are being sacrificed at the altar of the bottom line. The result is a crippling of our collective ability to promote equal opportunities and public services for all Canadians, and increasing disparities in income and wealth.

In saying this, no one is suggesting that a government should be fiscally irresponsible and deliberately live beyond its means. But it does suggest that a government by the people, of the people, for the people must get its priorities straight. Government and our leaders must be courageous, creative and innovative in finding new solutions to the challenges of the 1990s and not simply turn to the corporate world for advice, models and direction. They must define a new role for government, one that encourages the equally essential leadership required at all levels and in all sectors of society, notably the community, to ensure that we achieve our collective goals.

What is desperately lacking in Canada today is the "poetry of politics" as it is described in a recent article on the enduring attraction of Mario Cuomo (*The Atlantic*, December 1990). Where are the poets, someone who can express, as F.R. Scott did in his 1940s article "The State as a Work of Art", the following:

"Politics is the art of making artists. It is the art of developing in society the laws and institutions which will best bring out the creative spirit which lies, in greater or less degree, in every one of us. The right politics sets as its aim the maximum development of every individual. Free the artist in us, and the beauty of society will look after itself."

In no sphere is the desperate state of Canadian society so obvious as the constitutional. Here is what F.R. Scott had to say about constitutional change:

"Changing a constitution confronts a society with the most important choices, for in the constitution will be found the

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philosophical principles and rules which largely determine the relations of individual groups to one another and to the state. If human rights and harmonious relations between cultures are forms of the beautiful, then the state is a work of art that is never finished. Law thus takes its place, in theory and practice, among men’s highest and most creative activities.”

But what are we engaged in? Can we continue to function as a nation when the commission of inquiry studying Quebec’s political future was headed by two businessmen asking whether independence is “viable” and has shaped the debate as simply the bartering of this or that power like so many rug merchants? Can we continue to function as a nation when the national government, after failing miserably to persuade the vast majority of Canadians of the merit of the uninspiring little Canada vision in the Meech Lake Accord, is still convinced that the only problem was the amending formula? Can a country continue to exist when the national leader prefers doing deals with other self-interested first ministers rather than risking a consultation with the Canadian people through a referendum?

Finally, can a country continue to exist when government, academic and business elites are all running around in disarray saying that we simply must determine “what does Canada want?” as if the answer to that question is something we could total up on a balance sheet, plug into a computer program and expect an answer to pop out? As journalist John Cruickshank succinctly puts it, to ask such a question is “very eighties” and me-too-ish.

But it is more than that. It is myopic, inward-looking and captures much of what is wrong with our current leadership. We should not be asking what Canadians want. We should not be focusing on the satisfaction of short term needs and succumbing to siren calls from Quebec nationalists or other disgruntled regional forces whose proposals appeal only to our less noble me-first-and-damn-the-rest instincts.

We should be asking all Canadians to react beyond the present into the future and to think about how best to meet our collective needs, whether world peace or a clean environment. We should be asking what Canadians want our nation to accomplish nationally and internationally in the twenty-first century. We should be establishing fundamental principles and the essence of what Canadians believe in and where we want to go together. Only then should we ask what constitutional arrangements can best allow us to achieve this.

But this requires real leadership, not that which we have so

regrettably experienced in recent years. Sure, it is easy to make a constitutional deal when you give everything away to all the provinces. Sure, it is easy to conclude a deeply flawed free trade agreement, when the only concern is to appeal to everyone's selfish, me-first instincts on the basis that it will raise the sterile measurement of GNP by a tiny percentage.

But that is not leadership. Leadership means rising above the pressures of single interest groups and pursuing the broader national interest. It means thinking of future generations for whom our present will soon be their past. Most important, leadership involves appealing to and drawing out of us our more noble instincts like our commitment to sharing, to compassion for the less fortunate and the greater social justice.

For the moment, however, the constitutional debate, with few exceptions, remains without inspiration and devoid of passion. In large measure this is because the same elites referred to above, who have hijacked the debate so far, have bowed yet again to business cliches and a sterile corporate quantifiable approach to something that is intangible. They have, for example, wrongly transformed economic problems such as the national debt and deficit into a constitutional issue, the cure for which in their view appears to require the constitutional emasculation of the national government. As *La Presse* columnist Lysiane Gagnon succinctly noted in respect of the Allaire Report: This is "une reforme inspiree d'une philosophie qui refleete bien la mentalite actuellement dominee au Quebec: celle des gens d'affaires obsedes par le deficit, qui veulent, sous couvert de "decentralisation," reduire le role de l'Etat, couper les programmes sociaux et privatiser le regime d'assurance-sante" (February 9, 1991).

We are told that global forces have overwhelmed the nation state; we have entered a world without borders/frontiers in which attempts to exert national restraints on economic or financial flows, telecommunications and so forth must inevitably fail. We are told that governments must "disentagle," "disengage" as if part of a neat corporate shuffle. Thus the dean of establishment newspapers, *The Economist*, can confidently predict the break-up of nation states and that "fueled by the fires of self-determination, and made economically self-confident by the prospect of regional cooperation, lots of countries look set to break up again" (June 23, 1990). "In states that defer to some higher order, who really cares?" (December 8, 1990). (In a subsequent article *The Economist* did at least deplore the "infranationalist error of tribalism"

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Of course, are accurate. V world has indeed flows shift around Network, CNN, countries and Peru. Fax made spectacularly, did John Naisbitt travel by air east to two billion twentysomething Toronto and get

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including "the language-based movement for Quebec's independence since they are all aiming towards states based not on tolerant and fairly open little countries, but on the blinkered view that what should hold people together is ethnic, religious or linguistic sameness" [December 22, 1990]).

Of course, many of the observations concerning global forces are accurate. We are living in the ultimate global society. The world has indeed shrunk a la Marshall McLuhan. Massive financial flows shift around the world instantaneously. The Cable News Network, CNN, broadcasts in approximately one hundred and ten countries and is heard from Washington D.C. to the jungle in Peru. Fax machines evade even the tightest of regulations, most spectacularly, during the 1989 Tiananmen crisis in China. And as John Naisbitt notes in *Megatrends 2000*, over one billion people travel by air each year (3 million per day) and by 2000 this will rise to two billion. Today's new generation in particular — the twentysomethings — think nothing about getting on a plane in Toronto and getting off in Bombay.

But does this mean that the nation-state is obsolete? Does this mean that national government and public action are impotent? Does this mean that we should just sit back and negotiate the break-up or disintegration of Canada into so many regional blocks as the prime minister seems inclined to do, with equanimity and complacency? Does this mean that we cannot persuade Canadians once again to look beyond parochial provincial borders, regional concerns and short term time horizons and to take steps to ensure that our national government is equipped to carry out our long term collective goals and dreams? Of course not.

Although the nature of the challenges we face today, from environmental decay and nuclear proliferation to urban sprawl and desperate poverty, require international/supranational solutions and approaches, the sense of belonging to a country, in our case Canada, will still be essential and will survive. We will still be proud to be Canadians on the international stage, not because of traditional indices of power such as wealth and military capability. We will be proud because of our shared values, our ability to build a diverse yet tolerant society officially bilingual and open to many cultures, our respect for rights and freedoms, our compassion and determination in dealing with poverty and unemployment, our effectiveness in pursuing sustainable development in a resource rich land.

Perhaps most importantly, we will be proud because of our ability to project these values and achievements beyond our borders

to assist the poorer, struggling nations of the world achieve a better life and to create a more equitable world order. This is because Canadians are internationalists, that is, we define ourselves and our unique identity largely through our activities and participation in the wider world beyond North America. This will become increasingly evident as our population becomes increasingly multicultural.

But this will mean nothing without fundamental changes in our national leadership. Our leaders must be poets. They must talk about the value of being Canadian in our interdependent world and the importance of national cohesion to ensure that we act coherently on the world scene in all those areas of human activity which can no longer be addressed by national governments alone. They must draw us beyond the short term and make us think about how the world is changing and how the irresistible forces of interdependence are sweeping us into a more cosmopolitan age. They must then be able to transmit a vision of Canada to Canadians, a description of the projects we must accomplish together, an understanding of how we can reconcile a strong national government with sensitivity to community and regional concerns. The possibilities for public action are limited only by our imagination, and these in turn provide the domestic examples and credibility to guide our efforts at the international level.

Critical reforms include the integration of our employment and social assistance policies, a meaningful child care and parental leave program, a minimum children's benefit, a comprehensive disability insurance scheme, a national science and technology strategy, and new education and training strategies. These all involve areas of overlapping federal and provincial jurisdiction and necessitate the effective coordination of federal and provincial policies. But most important, firm national leadership is essential to enable us to get to first base, if we really believe that all Canadians should be the beneficiaries of progressive policy initiatives.

The absence of such leadership in recent years has permitted the me-first, materialistic baby boomers to remain in their shells. It has permitted the forces of incivility to dominate and our social solidarity to corrode. Sociologist Todd Gitlin suggests that cultural balkanization is one of several countertendencies to emerge, and in the Canadian context we can add regional balkanization. According to Gitlin, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, (1989) "Partly to resist homogenization and anti-social pressures, people identify with their tribes. The tribe — the ethnic or religious group, the profession, the affinity network — becomes the source of identity.

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The practice of mutual aid within ethnic, especially immigrant communities resists the onslaught of short-sighted economic calculation that undermines the war of all against all." Unfortunately this then becomes undermining and "the sense of common good is precarious . . . Rival communities compete for scarce resources. This is the normal play of politics of course, but the level of acrimony militates against the democratic project of forming working alliances. Worse, popular culture fills up with mutual recriminations, racist spleen, pop music nastiness, homophobic and anti-Semitic chic. At their worst, talk shows are the participatory version of this — barroom brawl become network prototype. At their best, talk shows permit some extended argument, becoming consumer society's substitute for robust political debate."

In this depressing situation, electoral politics no longer provide any outlet for meaningful citizenship. Instead, people turn to single issue groups to organize their energies more effectively. The latter development may not necessarily be a bad thing. But it should be viewed as an interim development while we regroup and refashion our national leadership and public institutions to fit the dawn of the twenty-first century. And we may find that a new ideology emerges to fuel this transformation that is neither left nor right, socialist nor capitalist — environmentalism. As Tom Kierans notes perceptively in a recent article, *Report on Business Magazine* (1989), "The Next Revolution," "environmentalism is deeply distrustful of an unfettered market economy, of the growth ethic and of technological development. Environmentalism forces us to reassess our materialism and calls for a reordering of values."

We must hope that our leaders, particularly in this time of constitutional uncertainty, can rise to the challenge and inspire all Canadians to look beyond the inward-looking, navel gazing questions of who or what should get which legislative power. And the simplistic statement that "Canada is not working" is unhelpful and misleading. Undoubtedly cynicism and disillusionment are at an all time high among Canadians. Yet when has Canada ever "worked" exactly as everyone would like? What is exciting about Canada is the constant challenge of balance and counterbalance in building a unique country. So, if we are in a crisis, it is not a constitutional crisis. It is a crisis of national leadership.

Of course we must address the legitimate concerns of Quebec. But Quebecers must be reminded of how the French language and culture is in fact flourishing and how much we have accomplished and can accomplish together as Canadians. And

before the constitutional discussions, such as they are, go much further, we must find a forum so that ordinary Quebecers can talk directly to other Canadians rather than through the nationalist filters of the Quebec media and intellectual elites. Direct questions need to be asked and answered: What initiatives does Quebec wish to undertake to preserve the French language and culture that have been stymied by the current division of powers? Are not six million French-speaking Quebecers better off as part of a pool of twenty-six million Canadians in an officially bilingual Canada, rather than alone and isolated in a much larger pool of 270 million English-speaking North Americans? Has not Quebec accomplished a great deal on the world stage as part of Canada, such as greater influence within and sensitivity towards la Francophonie, and would not an independent Quebec be relatively insignificant on the world stage? What about the value of having two levels of government in terms of better protection of human rights and greater potential for successful policies aimed at advancing social justice and equality?

Our leaders must also, for example, talk about the purposes for which we want to use government powers, and our shared values and goals as Canadians. They must talk about how we have built a great country which ensures equality of opportunity for all, and respect for basic rights and freedoms, human dignity and self-worth. They must talk about their experiences as Canadians, here and abroad, and what makes us respected and envied on the world stage while reminding us how bemused are those on the outside looking in to see us in our present state of disarray. They must talk about the challenges which we face in common and the joint action required to overcome them, more than what divides and irritates us.

Finally, they must talk positively about finding new constitutional arrangements and symbols to allow us to function more coherently and effectively, whether it is a new preamble to the Constitution, the abolition of the notwithstanding clause to ensure the primacy of the Charter, the reform of the Senate or the creation of a Canadian head of state. If they succeed, we will have brought the poetry back to politics and restored the critical degree of confidence in our political institutions and faith in our national leadership that is so necessary to a smooth transition into the twenty-first century. And we will have found again that special sense of idealism captured in author Robertson Davies' comment: "I think somewhere there is a dreamer, and he is dreaming us."

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