Contents/Table des matières

		Page
Editorial	**Join the dialogue**	2
Éditorial	**Une invitation au dialogue**	3
	Readers' comments / Tribune libre	4, 47
Lloyd Axworthy	**Star Wars: a sea of hidden commitments**	5

Theme Section: **The Third World: beyond sharing/ Vers l'interdépendance avec le tiers-monde:**

Bernard Wood	**North-South relations: into the foreign policy mainstream**	9
Herb Breau	**La revue de la politique extérieure et le monde en développement**	13
John Godfrey and Peter Dalglish	**Ethiopia: The Maritime Connection**	16
Madeleine Gariepy Dubuc	**Les femmes et leur décennie, 1975-1985**	19
Arthur Schlesinger Jr.	**Tracing liberal-conservative cycles in American politics**	21
Bob Foulkes	**Politicians and the media**	25
Monique Bégin	**Vieillir, demain: où en sommes-nous?**	28
Joseph Wearing	**Using electoral technology to win**	31
Otto Lang	**Isn't it time for a basic minimum wage?**	34
Colin Campbell	**The presidency and the crisis of executive leadership**	37
Wayne Patterson	**Liberalism amongst the robots**	40
Tom Axworthy with Richard Gwyn	**Liberal dilemmas**	44
Charles Caccia	**Pollution: a bitter lesson from Niagara**	46
Commentaire	**Marie-N. Choquet: Les bureaucrates au pouvoir?**	47
Commentary	**Gordon Floyd: The role of government**	48

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Interview

Tracing liberal-conservative cycles in American politics

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. is undoubtedly one of the world's great historians and the author of such influential works as the three volume series on *The Age of Roosevelt; A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House,* and a two volume work on Robert Kennedy. He served as a top-level White House advisor and confidant throughout the Kennedy administration and has been an active observer of and commentator on contemporary American politics.

Mr. Schlesinger is currently the Albert Schweitzer Professor in the humanities at City University, New York. In addition to his teaching activities, he is now working on the forth volume in the series on Roosevelt, and a new book on cycles in American politics that will be published later this year.

In this wide ranging interview with Deborah Coyne, Schlesinger discusses the future of liberalism and of the Democratic Party, as well as some of the key public policy issues of the day.

De Novo: In a *Wall Street Journal* article in 1982, you referred to neo-liberalism as a politically-futile course for the Democratic Party. What do you understand "neo-liberalism" to mean?

Schlesinger: I've never been absolutely clear what neo-liberalism means. In part, it originated as a kind of reaction to the 1980 election. Many Democrats thought that Reagan had a secret and that if they could only master that secret, then they could do as well as Reagan did. The secret, they decided, was hostility to government. Then, a fellow named Charles Peters who is the editor of the *Washington Monthly* put out a neo-liberal manifesto. In it he argued that liberals had been too anti-business,too anti-military, too pro-union, and too pro-government.

The real issue dividing the so-called neo-liberals from the Roosevelt-Kennedy tradition is the role of government. The Roosevelt-Kennedy tradition views government as a basic part of the means by which democracy attacks its problems. The emphasis on affirmative government is the great contribution of the modern Democratic Party. In contrast, the neo-liberals appear to reject affirmative government and assert the need to liberate ourselves from government and so forth. To this extent, they sound rather like Reaganites.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

De Novo: Will "neo-liberalism" be an enduring phenomenon?

Schlesinger: I think the issue of neo-liberalism is really a fake issue because, at the same time that neo-liberals attack affirmative government, they invoke the need for government just like other liberals. Even Charlie Peters, in his neo-liberal manifesto, said that we needed to bring back the Works Progress Administration and use it to rebuild the infrastructure of the country. This is a very good idea, but it isn't getting government off our backs, and it certainly isn't a new idea. It is the revival of an idea of the 1930s. So, I think generally the neo-liberal bark is worse than its bite. It is more of a publicity gimmick than a serious intellectual line.

De Novo: How do you explain the current popularity of the conservative creed: the less government the better?

Schlesinger: The reaction to government seems, at least in the United States, to be a cyclical matter. If you look at American politics, there is an inherent cyclical rhythym. We go through periods of action-passion-idealism-reform for two decades or so until the country is worn out by the process and disillusioned by the results. And then we go through a period in which the emphasis shifts from public action to private interest, from government to the market, from democracy to capitalism. I think we are now in the private interest phase of the cycle.

De Novo: Could you describe these cycles in greater detail?

Schlesinger: If you look at this century, the first two decades with Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson reveal progressive government — a period marked by a great effort to democratize our political and economic institutions at home, and then to make the world safe for democracy.

After 20 years of that, the country was worn out and needed a respite. So we had the 1920s — a decade dominated by private interest. This was then succeeded by the 30s and 40s — Roosevelt and the New Deal, Truman and the Fair Deal. After two decades of public activism, the country was exhausted again. The 1950s were then a period dominated by private interest, like the 1920s.

The 1960s were again forward-moving, public purpose: Kennedy and the New Frontier, Johnson and the Great Society, the racial revolution, the war on poverty. But this time I think the activism took a sour turn because of events in Dallas and the Vietnam war. The energies released became destructive and seemed to threaten to tear apart the social fabric. So this period of public action did not run the customary two decades and sometime in the 1970s we went into a conservative mood — Ford, Carter, reaching a climax with Reagan. Thus the Reagan period seems to be a re-enactment of the 1950s as the 1950s was a re-enactment of the 1920s, the 1920s a re-enactment of 1890s — a 30-year cycle.

De Novo: How does your theory explain the very strong support for Reagan among the 18 and 24 year olds?

Schlesinger: I suppose that it does seem ironic that the youngest voters voted for the oldest president in American history. But in generational terms, it's perfectly logical. The 18 to 24 year olds were all born between 1960 and 1966. They are the children of the Eisenhower generation, and the grandchildren of the Harding/Coolidge/Hoover generation. They have no memory of Kennedy or Johnson. They came of political age in the 1970s and it is therefore entirely predictable that they should vote Republican.

De Novo: I noticed that you included the Carter years as part of the current conservative phase?

Schlesinger: Very much so. Carter was the most conservative Democratic president since Cleveland. In his January 1978 State of the Union address, he said the following: "Government cannot solve our problems, it cannot set our goals, it cannot define our vision. Government cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy or provide energy". You can't imagine FDR or Truman or Kennedy or Johnson saying these words.

It is clear that the roots of Reaganism lie in the Carter years, but the roots of both lie in that cyclical process of exhaustion and disillusion.

De Novo: When will we again enter the activist phase?

Schlesinger: It appears to be a 30-year, generational cycle: thus, on the activist side, Theodore Roosevelt in 1901, Franklin Roosevelt in 1933, John Kennedy in 1961. If this rhythm holds, we shall have a marked change in the direction of American policy sometime shortly before or after 1990. Remember, this is a generational phenomenon. Franklin Roosevelt and Truman were shaped politically by the era of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Kennedy and Johnson came of age politically when FDR was setting the national goals.

Now the generation that came of political age during the Kennedy years has yet to make its mark. And it will make its mark when people become weary of this private interest phase. People will want to have some greater meaning in life than making a fast buck. After a time, they will begin again to ask not what the country can do for them but what they can do for the country. In a general sense, two things happen during the private interest phase of the cycles. One is that rest replenishes national energies and recharges the national batteries; the other is that the problems that are neglected become acute, threaten to become intolerable and demand remedy. As these things happen, you move out of the private interest phase back into the public action phase and the emphasis shifts from capitalism to democracy.

De Novo: How do you distinguish capitalism from democracy?

Schlesinger: Capitalism and democracy are allied concepts but point in different directions. The essential values of capitalism are the maximization of profit, the sanctity of private property and the survival of the fittest. The essential values of democracy are the greatest good for the greatest number and the notion of the general welfare of the people. Democracy is prepared to restrict the pursuit of profits, to regulate private property and to help the "unfit" to survive.

De Novo: As we shift back to the public action phase, what form will "affirmative government" take?

Schlesinger: Affirmative government doesn't necessarily mean enlarged federal bureaucracy and spending. Affirmative government in the next period will employ more planning; that is, more involvement in direction and coordination, the concerting of interests, rather than increased expenditures or increased bureaucracy.

De Novo: In what area will affirmative government play an important role in future?

Schlesinger: The great domestic issues facing the United States are essentially macro-economic issues — questions of unemployment, of inflation, of economic growth. In addition, we have the problems of racial justice, and the decay of our cities and/or our infrastructure. I don't see how any of these problems can be solved by the unfettered market. The alternative to the market is the use of government. Government, of course, can be used in a whole variety of ways. I think we have to move in the broad sense away from the adversarial approach to the solution of problems, and much more towards a conception of social partnership, in which government works closely with management and labor.

De Novo: In what way will this social partnership emerge?

Schlesinger: It will have to arise in relation to specific issues, and the first issue in which it is likely to arise is inflation. In my view, the only way in which we will be able to make our economy inflation-proof is through an incomes policy. This will require some institutional form of social partnership. It will also require experimentation, just as it took a decade of experimentation to make our economy depression-proof.

Unfortunately,the major precedent that we have for such social partnership is not an altogether happy one. This is the system of codes established by Roosevelt as part of the National Recovery Administration. But the principle of such codes properly worked out has some validity.

The only way that recent administrations have fought inflation is through inducing recession, which means that the burden of the struggle against inflation is borne by the people least able to bear it. This is a poor way to go about it. We should work out in a spirit of co-operation some way of relating wage increases and profit margins to increases in productivity, as has been done in Japan, West Germany and Austria. And we should also move towards synchronization of collective bargaining.

De Novo: What are your views on the need to reduce the deficit?

Schlesinger: I have heard for half a century that the deficit is going to wreck future generations and it hasn't happened. I simply cannot get excited by the size of the deficit. The deficit is not, it seems to me, disproportionate in relation to Gross National Product. I think the element in the deficit which is worrying is that part of it which is produced by high interest rates. For example next year $150 billion will be spent simply to service debt.

We had a much larger deficit in relation to GNP during the Second World War. But at that time we had an interst rate of 1% — something made possible partly by wage and price controls, and partly by different leadership in the Federal Reserve Bank.

I don't know enough about money market pressures to evaluate to what extent interest rates are uncontrollable. But as long as we use the interest rate as a means of stopping inflation and slowing the economy, we are going to get this heavy, extortionate charge on the deficit that only enriches bankers. Somehow, therefore, we must find a way to deal with inflation other than through high interest rates, such as through the incomes policy I've just mentioned. Then, the servicing charge on the deficit could be reduced.

De Novo: Many argue that the size of the deficit, quite apart from the servicing charges, indicates that we are living beyond our means and at the expense of future generations. Are there more immediate ways that we could reduce the absolute level of the deficit?

Schlesinger: Certainly a tax increase would be inappropriate — it would slow down economic growth and increase unemployment. In fact, the reason we are in a period of economic recovery is because we are running a $200 billion deficit. It has nothing to do with supply-side economics — it is good old Keynesian, demand-side recovery. A tax increase would jeopardize this recovery.

De Novo: But could government expenditures be reduced?

Schlesinger: Yes. For example, one thing that has been irritating me for some time is the terrific waste in the defence program. On several occasions I have urged the establishment of a body like the Truman committee during the Second World War. The Truman committee was a committee charged by the Senate to oversee the defence program. It conducted very careful investigations and scared the hell out of the contractors and the Pentagon. It seems to me that we need this kind of committee to look at such horrendous examples of waste such as $600 toilet seats, or how General Dynamics charged the government for all sorts of personal expenses — Christmas parties and so forth. The whole thing is a racket of the worst sort. But of course, cutting out waste can only have a marginal effect on the budget. The substance of military spending requires the most stringent re-examination.

De Novo: Turning now to the future of the Democratic Party, many have observed that the Democratic Party has become little more than the sum of a growing number of special interest groups or coalitions, like Jesse Jackson's rainbow coalition. What is your view of the relationship between the Party and such special interest groups and coalitions?

Schlesinger: I am against special interest caucuses within the Party, at least as ends in themselves. You have to work on the issues. To illustrate, under Roosevelt and Kennedy, the Democratic Party had a commanding national vision into which lesser interests fitted. The Party has now lost that vision and it must regain it.

The caucuses in the Democratic National Committee — the black caucus, the women's caucus and so on — had their uses in pursuing goals of affirmative action and ensuring enough women delegates and non-white delegates at conventions. But insofar as they pursue their own issues at the expense of the Party as a whole, they become institutionalized and disruptive. Today the caucuses make it difficult to develop the national vision that any serious political party must have.

De Novo: Does the Republican Party have a national vision?

Schlesinger: Reagan certainly has persuaded the people that he has a national vision. Reagan has no command of detail but has a sense of the direction in which he wishes to move the country. Of course, he may be moving it back to some earlier century, but he is moving it. And he has a vision of the Republican Party as the party of economic opportunity, the party of free enterprise. In addition, the cyclical shift now favors someone who will articulate the virtues of private interests.

In fact, however, the Republican Party is just as much in the grip of special interests as the Democratic Party, and its special interests are much worse for the general welfare than those of the Democrats. It seems to me that Mondale's special interests such as teachers, women, blacks and organized labor are far better for the health of the nation than Reagan's special interests — the oil companies, bankers, stock brokers and defence contractors.

De Novo: Can these special interests and coalitions really deliver the votes to a particular political party?

Schlesinger: No. Television and the mass media make this difficult. This misplaced emphasis on coalitions and special interests assumes that the leaders of such groups, whether a woman, a black, a Puerto Rican or whatever, represent something and can deliver their constituencies. The fact is that they cannot, because television now permits people to make their own judgments based on unprecedented amounts of information. So, while coalitions can be created by issues, by crisis and by political leadership, they cannot be created by a few self-appointed representatives.

De Novo: The labor constituency has traditionally been an important element of the Democratic Party. But many now argue that with the failure of the labor unions to keep pace with the shift into an information, service sector dominated society, a new "post-union" Democratic Party is emerging. What are your views of the future of the labor constituency within the Democratic Party?

Schlesinger: The trade union movement in this country is very much on the defensive. In fact, I believe that there are fewer people in trade unions today than there were 40 years ago, even with the population increase. The trade union movement is experiencing body blows with the devastation of heavy industry, and it has not found ways to organize the service and high technology sectors. So, undoubtedly the labor constituency is losing its strength within the party. Moreover, as was evident in the 1984 election, no leader, even of a major coalition like labor, can deliver his constituency.

De Novo: What are the implications for the political process and political parties of religious groups such as Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority?

Schlesinger: Again, it seems to me that the popularity of these groups is an entirely predictable by-product of the conservative swing in the cycle. In the 1920s, there was a similar phenomenon: fundamentalists were trying to ban the teaching of Darwin in schoolrooms, and to impose prohibition on the hapless country. Sinclair Lewis' novel, *Elmer Gantry*, epitomized the period. Subsequently in the 1950s, Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale appointed themselves as the moral arbiters of the country. So in my view Jerry Falwell is a predictable and equally ephemeral feature of the current conservative cycle.

De Novo: Lester Thurow and others predict that with the advance of technology and the information society, the middle class is shrinking. Society is becoming increasingly bipolarized — with a rich class controlling the technology, especially in the service sector, and the working class carrying out the lower level tasks. What are the implications of such a bipolar society for the future of a liberal democracy that has always been built on a burgeoning middle class?

Schlesinger: I'm skeptical about the argument that high technology will produce only a small number of high-paid jobs and a large number of low-paid jobs. I think that the middle class in one way or another is here to stay.

De Novo: What now is being done within the Democratic Party in the wake of the 1984 election? Are there any signs of a new leader and a platform that will have a galvanizing effect similar to the experience of the 1930s under Roosevelt, and the 1960s under Kennedy?

Schlesinger: It is too early for a new leader to be coming forward, and since we do not have a parliamentary system as in Canada, there is no obligation on the opposition party to present coherent alternatives. The party has a lot of ideas — we are in the "let a thousand flowers bloom" phase. There are a lot of very bright people in the Democratic Party who are doing some hard thinking and developing certain new approaches such as the social partnership approach that I mentioned earlier.

De Novo: What perception do Americans have of Canada and Prime Minister Mulroney?

Schlesinger: The general impression is that Mulroney has cast himself as Reagan's little brother — something that pleases some people in the United States, but disappoints others. Historically, an independent-minded Canada, as with Mike Pearson and Pierre Trudeau, and even in a kind of screwy way with Mackenzie King, has played a very important role. Canada is a country that American presidents have to take into account. This is sometimes exasperating but on the whole valuable because the Canadian position, particularly on international issues, has generally been a reasoned one.

I hope that Mulroney is not determined to become a Reagan stooge because he will abdicate a great possibility to influence world affairs — a possibility that Canadian prime ministers have historically used for the benefit of the world in general.

De Novo: Can Canada influence American foreign policy?

Schlesinger: On arms control, in particular, it is important to have a strong Canadian voice. There are some people in the Reagan administration who do not believe in arms control; in fact they favor an arms race. They think that an unlimited arms race is our best weapon against the evil empire, since the Russians will either try to keep up with us and wreck their economy in the process, or they will fail to keep up and leave us with a decisive military advantage. So, when forced by public opinion and Congress to present arms controls proposals, these people will always make such proposals so one-sided as to be completely unacceptable to the Russians. I think it is critical therefore that Canada as well as our European allies speak out strongly against this.

De Novo: What is your view of the new arms control negotiations?

Schlesinger: Sending this present team to get an arms control deal is like sending Typhoid Mary to stop a typhoid epidemic. These talks will not succeed unless the allies bring a hell of a lot of pressure to bear and insist that controlling the nuclear arms race is absolutely essential to the future of the human race.

De Novo: What do you think of Star Wars — the Strategic Defence Initiative?

Schlesinger: I think it is ridiculous. Most scientific opinion agrees that you can never create an impermeable shield. Yet if we try to move toward that, the obvious Soviet reaction will be to build enough missiles to overwhelm the shield, as well as enough cruise missiles and bombers to go under the shield, not to mention all their submarine-based missiles off the coast targeted at the United States. Star Wars cannot help but be immensely destabilizing and dangerous.

De Novo: In Canada, many Canadians are cynical about and disillusioned with the political process and their elected representatives. Public trust seems to have dissipated significantly. Do you think that public confidence in the political process is enhanced through the operations of the American committee system?

Schlesinger: I think a strong and effective committee system is very valuable, not only to the general public, but also as an instrument for strengthening legislative oversight. In the United States, for example, the committee system educates the executive, restrains him and forces him to take other things into account.

De Novo: How would you describe your feelings about the future of liberal and democratic values? Are you a pessimist or an optimist?

Schlesinger: A short-term pessimist; a long-term optimist.

Politicians and the media

by Bob Foulkes

During every election, and particularly in the cataclysmic federal election of last summer, serious questions are raised about the role and function of the media. Because it is clear that the media have now taken the pre-eminent role in setting the agenda for an election — including offering observations on relative strengths and weaknesses of the candidates and picking winners and losers, it is important periodically to assess their performance.

Bob Foulkes is a public affairs consultant in Calgary trying to prove that liberals can still survive west of Thunder Bay.

My assessment is that, by and large, Canadians were well-served by the media in the election. We got fast, relatively accurate, comprehensive and interesting news from our television and radio reporting. We got objective, timely, factual and comprehensive reporting in our newspapers and magazines. Finally, we got insightful, in some cases prescient, observations from columnists. In particular both Jeffrey Simpson and Richard Gwyn deserve full marks for their columns.

The true test was that those on the inside turned to their writing first to find out how their own campaign was doing. If Liberals had paid more attention to Lawrence Martin's reports during 1983-84 on the Progressive