

Searching for the New Liberalism

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OPENING REMARKS

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**Trinity College, University of
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Welcome to the Conference Searching for the New Liberalism.

It started some four or five years ago...for me. I had a conversation with my son who was then a university student. He reminded me of a conversation he and I had with Senator Keith Davey a few years earlier. It was Senator Davey who had turned to me and asked – “what kind of liberal society do you want your son to live in?”

That question had remained unanswered for these many years. But for both my son and me it remained a vital question.

I recall in subsequent years my son turning to me every now and then and asking: “Do you remember that question? Well, don’t forget it and make sure that sooner or later you try to answer it. It is important for me and my generation.”

Well, it took me some many years to get here. But here we are.

The question is still valid and it is my hope that this Searching for The New Liberalism conference will provide, at least, the beginnings of the answer to that vital question.

Flash forward with me to August 18th, 2002.

It is a warm, Sunday morning.

It is near Cracow, Poland.

There are over two million people assembled in a field called Blonia.

Some 5% of the entire Polish population is assembled on this field.

They are there to see Pope John Paul II – probably for the last time.

The Pope chooses to address the problems of “...the noisy propaganda of liberalism, of freedom without responsibility...” He calls on his people to fight persistent poverty with “creative charity”. That is a most intriguing phrase! He asks his countrymen to help impoverished neighbours, support their families and educate their children.

It is astonishing to me that the Pope would address the problems of liberalism in Poland, to his countrymen, in those circumstances.

A few weeks earlier, it was Prime Minister Tony Blair inviting former President Bill Clinton to England, to a “think tank” to find creative solutions to the apparent plight of “new labour.”

Later in August, it is the Socialist Party of France meeting in their annual summer conference asking questions which are not that dissimilar.

Clearly, the fundamental questions and dilemmas which lie at the heart of liberalism are being discussed in many places, by many people, from many political positions.

So, it is now our turn to take up this discussion and debate and to relocate in Canada.

In many ways, Canada is the best place to carry forward this discussion on liberalism. One can argue that Canada has had the most successful liberal regime of any country in the world. Indeed, if one treats the name of political parties seriously, namely that they reflect something about the political ideology from which they spring, then Canadian liberalism is a powerful reminder of how successful the ideology and the party which draws its name from liberalism has been in this country. No other country in the world can claim such a successful Liberal Party, for so long, directing governments and, by extension, affecting the structure of that society in liberal directions.

But we should also be reminded that liberalism has also been a very, very controversial political ideology and political theory over the past few hundred years. One reading of the history of liberalism would assert that it is due to the failure of liberalism that socialism arose. Indeed, it is the critical interplay between these two competing political ideologies and theories that much of the creative politics of the past 150 years has been played out. It is only the “unfinished” business of liberalism which keeps socialism and democratic socialists alive today.

Also, one must not forget that liberalism has been the focus of an ongoing and at times savage critique from an alternative source, namely the political right. Historically, it began with the critique of liberalism by a decaying aristocratic conservatism. But by the late nineteenth century that critique became merged with the philosophical right of Joseph de Maistre, Papal Encyclicals, Catholic Action, and others, who equate liberalism with modernity, the collapse of value and the excesses of unfettered economic greed.

By the mid-twentieth century, this critique becomes extended into more secular terms by political philosophers such as Leo Strauss and Alistair McIntyre. The viability of this critique of liberalism today is sustained by communitarianism, communitarians – such as Charles Taylor - and others.

Debates in political philosophy may appear to be far removed from the struggles which take place in the political arena, where resources must be allocated and re-allocated, where competing interests vie for political ascendancy, where power and influence predominate.

But it is clear today, during the early years of the 21st century, that the search for fundamental political ideas, for vital and viable political discourse is taking many people – from the Pope to Tony Blair – back to the discourse on liberalism.

So, what is it? What is it about Canada which has allowed us to maintain liberal discourse so close to the exercise of political power? Is Canada a liberal society? How have political structures, institutions and policies in Canada over the past century reflected liberal values and liberal discourse? And can these same structures, institutions and policies continue to reflect a viable liberal discourse in this new century?

That is why we are here – to extend the Canadian discourse on liberalism further.

So, what do we hope for – after these next two days?

The participants at this conference represent various professions, perspectives and backgrounds. In concrete terms, there will be a book emerging from this Conference.

The timetable is very tight. We MUST receive final copies of papers by October 14th, at the latest. Publication date is November 23rd. We have a commitment from Indigo/Chapters that the book will be distributed throughout Canada...a perfect Christmas gift for the Canadian reading public.

Second, it is my hope – given my ‘checkered’ past - that if it is the will of the participants, that we should be able to extend the intellectual discourse on liberalism in Canada on a bi-annual basis. I recall my recent experience with international broadcasting where we were able to develop a very successful and very international bi-annual discourse on the subject, in Canada. That remains to be discussed.

Third, it is my hope that we will be able to re-introduce students of Canadian politics from the high school through the university levels into the discourse on liberalism. As a retired university professor, I find it sorrowful that the “discourse on Canadian liberalism” has had such “bad press”, such terrible “academic reviews” and has all but been purged from the curriculum. It is my hope that with some hard work, over a longer period of time, all of this can be repaired. It is, indeed, our duty and obligation to the next generation.

Thank you.