

Searching for the New Liberalism

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Social Cohesion and Nation-Building: The Role of Liberal Values in Connecting Canadians

By Brooke Jeffrey

In a country where the Queen is asked to drop the puck at an NHL game, where *Hockey Night in Canada* leads the TV ratings and a contract dispute between the show's anchor and CBC management receives front page coverage in the national news, the genius of the Molson brewing dynasty in linking its image with the national pastime seems self-evident. Yet after years of successful "lifestyle" commercials, the company's abrupt shift to an ad with political overtones during the 2000 NHL playoffs led some industry insiders to question whether Molson's marketing team was losing its touch. This scepticism quickly faded. The "*I am Canadian*" campaign -- featuring an average 'Joe' ranting about differences between American and Canadian culture -- went on to become one of the most popular commercials in the annals of Canadian television. By the end of the season there were groups of fans in living rooms and bars around the country reciting "the rant" along with the ad's star, an unknown actor whose career took flight when he was asked to perform the monologue at non-sports across Canada long after the season ended.

The ad was not popular with everyone, however. Many political observers viewed it with dismay, arguing it was filling a void in public consciousness caused by an absence of political leadership. Canadians would not be clinging so desperately to a beer commercial to define their identity, they argued, if a meaningful new political vision had been presented. Others maintained the ad was merely a harmless outlet for the expression of Canadian patriotism, into which little else should be read.

Both sides in the debate appeared to ignore the fact the monologue contained not only distinctions based on popular culture, but references to important differences in political *values*. True, Joe's rant included such trivial matters as the correct pronunciation of letters of the alphabet and the proper term for a sofa. But it also highlighted Canadians' support for peacekeeping, multiculturalism and an activist role for government, and their rejection of American-style law-and-order and cultural assimilation.

There is an important message in this subtext. In his seminal work, *Continental Divide*, political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset has demonstrated how Canadians have long defined their national identity in contradistinction with their American neighbours, primarily on the basis of differing values.¹

¹ S.M. Lipset. *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of Canada and the United States*. (New York: Routledge, 1990)

Countless polls have reaffirmed Lipset's conclusions. As Gregg and Posner put it, "What made us distinct was that we weren't Americans, and we were proud of it."² It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that the values identified by Lipset which allow Canadians to distinguish themselves from Americans are precisely the type of liberal values referred to in the Molson ad. Intentionally or not, the "*I Am Canadian*" ad confirmed the deep-rooted commitment of most Canadians to the underlying values of modern liberalism.

Liberal Values and the Welfare State

Historically the most important of liberal values has been the supremacy of the individual. This concept underpins other well-known liberal values such as tolerance of diversity, equality of opportunity, fairness and equitable treatment. However in many modern liberal democracies, and particularly in Canada, these traditional liberal values have been accompanied by an ingrained appreciation for the collective good. This modern strand of liberalism resulted in the politics of inclusion and a sort of "social solidarity" in which citizens were persuaded that the interests of the individual would be best served by collective action and/or government assistance for the less fortunate or disadvantaged.³

Of course this modern liberal vision of an activist role for government was epitomized following the Depression and the Second World War by the emergence of the welfare state. Virtually all of the western liberal democracies created programs to achieve this objective, but there were variations in approach as each government responded to particular circumstances. In the United States, for example, President Roosevelt introduced the New Deal. But, as Lipset and many others have noted, despite this initiative most Americans also continued to cling to the more traditional liberal emphasis on the individual. As a result they had the least attachment to the concept of the collective good, while Europeans embraced this modern liberalism most enthusiastically.

Canadians also embraced the welfare state. Moreover the standard social programs --such as health care and unemployment insurance-- were accompanied by policies of equalization and regional development, two important and distinctive aspects of the modern liberal vision in this country. (Indeed, the concept of equalization was considered so integral an element of our political culture that it was

²A. Gregg and M. Posner. *The Big Picture*. (Toronto: McFarlane, Walter and Ross, 1990).

³ See for example Louis Hartz.(ed.) *The Liberal Tradition in America*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953) and Ken McRae, "Louis Hartz's Concept of the Fragment Society and its Application to Canada", *Etudes Canadiennes*, vol.5, 1978. pp. 17-30

entrenched in the constitution amendment package of 1982.)

This difference in approach explains much of Canadians' tendency to distinguish themselves from Americans. Not only did Canadians embrace the welfare state, but they accepted the idea that the state could play a positive role in society and act in the public good, while Americans continued to view the state as a potential threat to individual liberty.

Regardless of the nature of the programs established, however, it is important to note that modern liberalism justified the various initiatives of the welfare state not simply on the basis of altruism but, as American economist and former Secretary of Labour Robert Reich has stressed, by demonstrating that they were in *everyone's* long-term self-interest. Many programs contained provisions to highlight this sense of collective benefit. The concept of universality, for example, reinforced the vested self-interest of the middle class in maintaining these programs, which were largely financed by them. For Canadians, the idea that "we are all in this together" was applied not only to individuals but to regions, strengthening the attachment to the federation. What Reich terms the "liberal idea of common dependence" was even extended to international affairs in the early years of the post war era, with liberals in all western democracies coming together to forge "common security" policies such as the creation of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods agreement on international trade.⁴

Reich's point, of course, is that the emphasis on an individual's long-term self-interest has been increasingly downplayed or even ignored by many liberal politicians in recent years, at the expense of public support for some of their initiatives. The persuasive argument that "we are all in this together" has been lost. A corollary to this observation is that the discourse of modern liberalism is in danger of losing its ability to connect citizens.

Since this presentation is part of a panel on "Culture, Cohesion and Connecting Canadians", where others will be speaking about the role of cultural institutions and technology in achieving this objective, I want to emphasize the continuing importance of liberal *values and ideas* as a means of connecting Canadians. This point can hardly be overstated in a country where political integration is still a work in progress.

Political Integration and Liberal Values

All states need to achieve and maintain a healthy level of political integration. For many of the countries of western Europe the existence of a well-established national identity was taken for granted. This natural cohesion provided a base on which liberal-minded governments could easily build democratic institutions and programs. But new states, and especially ones like Canada -- a country which Prime Minister Mackenzie King famously declared had "too much geography" and too little history -- first need to *create* an overarching national identity with which citizens can identify.

⁴ Robert Reich. *The Resurgent Liberal*. (New York: Random House, 1989) pp. 279-80

Naturally the symbolic trappings of the state -- anthems, flags, or legislative buildings, for example -- have a role to play in achieving national identity, and one might assume they would be the first order of business for a new state. Certainly they should not be dismissed lightly in terms of their potential role in uniting citizens. However meaningful integration requires considerably more substance in order to achieve lasting citizen loyalty. In Canada, where many of these symbols took nearly one hundred years to create, their role was even less significant. Nation-building was left almost entirely to substantive state initiatives, from railways to the CBC, and notably to national projects resulting from liberal values.

As public opinion polls have repeatedly demonstrated, the various elements of the welfare state, and particularly the national health care plan, consistently rank among the most important aspects of national identity for Canadians. That this is true across regions is even more striking. A recent Canada West poll, for example, found that the political values of Albertans differ very little from those of other Canadians, especially on social issues. In fact, Albertans' support for a publicly funded medicare system is among the highest in the country.

Of course integration is particularly important in countries with plural societies, (like Canada), where minority groups -- religious, ethnic or linguistic -- need to feel not only protected but positively engaged in the national project. As Michael Ignatieff has argued, the success of many states with plural societies depends on their ability to create a national identity based first and foremost on the concept of "civic nationalism".⁵ For these states, the political values expressed through the constitution, political institutions and government policies are the glue that unites all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic diversity.

Ignatieff's notion of civic nationalism is especially important for Canada. The *Constitution Act, 1867* contained several important measures to achieve this. The rule of law, the protection of civil liberties and the choice of a federal system of government -- as well as the numerous guarantees of linguistic and religious freedom -- revealed an overarching set of common values with which all Canadians could identify from the beginning, a point made forcefully by Quebec Liberal Leader Jean Charest in his address to the November 1999 Forum of Federations Conference at Mont Tremblant.

Over time additional government initiatives reflecting these liberal values, such as the *Official Languages Act*, multiculturalism policy and, most recently, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, have built on the original constitutional measures to strengthen civic nationalism and, by extension, national identity. Like the welfare state, these liberal initiatives have served to connect Canadians across regions and mainstream political parties to an extent that sometimes is underappreciated by Liberal politicians. Despite the best efforts of the neoconservatives, for example, polls consistently show very high levels of

⁵Michael Ignatieff.. *Blood and Belonging*. (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1993) pp. 6-7

public support for the Charter in all parts of Canada, including Quebec. Perhaps equally surprising is the Ipsos-Reid poll of April 2002 which found support for the Charter stood at nearly 70% in Alberta.

While this may seem reassuring, it is hardly a license for liberals to become complacent. More than a decade of neoconservative discourse may not have affected Canadians' underlying liberal values to a great extent, but it has certainly sown the seeds of concern and confusion about the programs designed to implement those values. Take two of the issues that will be discussed later in this conference. Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, many Canadians now believe the health care system is in crisis. More importantly, they increasingly believe it is unaffordable. The consequences of these misconceptions can be found in other polling data which reveal growing numbers of Canadians are prepared to consider heretofore unacceptable options such as private sector delivery of some medical services or even user fees, apparently believing they have little choice.

Attacks by neoconservatives on the Charter, multiculturalism, bilingualism and aboriginal self-government have all been based on the premise that the state has no role to play in assuring equality of opportunity, but rather must treat all citizens "equally." Likewise government initiatives to promote equality of opportunity or access -- such as affirmative action plans or grants for groups representing the disadvantaged -- have been routinely described as "unfair". Many Canadians, committed to values of equality and fairness, now increasingly find themselves confused as to the real impact of such programs.

A similar situation exists with respect to the activist role of the state generally. Many Canadians now seem to believe it is inappropriate if not actually undemocratic for the federal government to implement any new programs if doing so might result in a deficit, however temporary. And, while many of these same respondents repeatedly indicate they favour increased spending on health care, postsecondary education and training programs and national home care or drug plans, they also reject any increase in taxation, instead supporting further reductions in personal taxation levels. Clearly the liberal concept of government spending as an investment, to improve the quality of life of citizens, has been lost, as has the link between taxation and the provision of programs and services for citizens. These linkages have been severed by neoconservative rhetoric that remains largely unchallenged, rhetoric such as Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's outrageous but widely-publicized remark at the founding meeting of the United Alternative in February 1999 that Alberta's tax dollars go east and disappear into the black hole of the federal government. Perhaps even more significant has been the increasing prevalence of neoconservative discourse in national debate. With Canadians now accustomed to being referred to as "taxpayers" and "consumers", but rarely as "citizens", the notion that "we are all in this together" is fading rapidly.

In light of such claims it is not surprising that the degree of regional alienation, particularly in western Canada, also appears to be on the increase. Despite decades of being on the receiving end of equalization payments, and despite the irrefutable "per capita" fairness of funding formulae for national social programs, many Canadians in the west believe their region is not treated fairly by the national government. One of the major reasons for this perception, of course, has been the inflammatory discourse

of the Reform/Alliance leadership. But it has also been exacerbated by the neoconservative discourse of Premiers such as Ralph Klein and Mike Harris, both of whom have utilized a Awe versus they@ framework to challenge basic liberal tenets such as equalization.

As a result I would argue the two major challenges faced by liberalism over the past twenty years have been the emergence of a neoconservative public discourse and the phenomenon of globalization which provided the opportunity for this discourse to emerge. In my view liberals have not yet responded appropriately to these challenges, although progress has certainly been made since 1993. After briefly reviewing some of the consequences of the lack of comprehensive liberal response to this neoconservative attack, I would like to propose a course of action which should help to repair the psychological damage and restore public confidence in liberalism.

The Challenges of Neo-Conservatism and Globalization

Few would disagree that the phenomenon of globalization, and the technological revolution on which it was founded, have produced a major societal upheaval. Many would argue the disruption to institutions and individuals has been equivalent to that caused by the industrial revolution. Certainly it has led to widespread questioning of some of the basic premises of both modern capitalism and liberalism. Just as Keynesian economics has been challenged by Milton Friedman and his disciples, so liberal concepts of the role of the welfare state have been challenged by the public choice theories and social Darwinism of so-called neoconservatives.

One of the most insidious effects of globalization has been to foster what Linda Weiss refers to as "the myth of the powerless state."⁶ With international corporations acquiring more wealth than many states, and new technologies make it appear increasingly difficult if not impossible for national governments to legislate or regulate the activities of these corporations, two important political changes have taken place. First, public attention has shifted from national governments to international organizations, where it is believed the real power now lies. Many of these organizations are perceived -- rightly or not -- as undemocratic and unaccountable. A corollary to this development is that citizen participation in domestic politics, and especially in political parties, has declined significantly, an issue addressed in detail by another panel later in this conference.

The second important change flows directly from the first. As citizens in most western liberal democracies increasingly began to question the ability of national governments to protect them from the worst consequences of globalization, they also questioned the role of the state generally. Many began to return to the older liberal view of the supremacy of the individual, believing they needed to take their own measures to protect themselves and their families, and accepting the neoconservative argument that the less the state intervened the better.

⁶ L. Weiss. *The Myth of the Powerless State*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998)

As I have argued elsewhere, this change occurred in large measure because of the non-response of liberals to these developments.⁷ Or, as Robert Reich has put it, the neoconservative "parable" to explain these developments was persuasive largely because liberals failed to construct an acceptable alternative parable. In Canada as elsewhere this appears to have been partly the result of an unwillingness on the part of political elites to recognize that there was a problem or that each generation must be reintroduced to the underlying concepts of liberalism. John Kenneth Galbraith makes this point in painful detail in his scathing analysis of the Reagan years, demonstrating how successive generations of middle-class Americans came to believe they were responsible for their own success and failed to recognize the many benefits they received from the state to help them achieve this success.⁸ In a speech delivered at the University of Toronto in early 1998, Michael Ignatieff decried the neoconservative attack on liberal values and the failure of liberals to respond, stating that "nothing has done the electoral and moral credibility of liberalism more harm than the failure to take this attack seriously."

⁷ B. Jeffrey. *Hard Right Turn: The Rise of Neoconservatism in Canada*. (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2000) pp. 442-9.

⁸ J.K. Galbraith. *The Culture of Contentment*. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1992)

One of the most serious consequences of this development has been what Christopher Lasch called the "revolt of the elites."⁹ For those of the middle class who were losers in the globalization sweepstakes, the state not surprisingly became less meaningful because of the cutbacks introduced to the social safety net imposed by a neoconservative agenda. But Lasch points out the state also became less relevant for those winners in the middle class, who succeeded despite the turbulent economic times. Many now believe they can continue to survive without the benefits of the welfare state, which in any event have been severely diminished. At the same time, as Reich has argued, the techno-elites produced by globalization have in many cases not only ceased to identify with the values of the welfare state but also with the idea of the nation state itself. Until very recently these upper middle-class professionals have been able to cross borders at will and sell their technical services to the highest bidder. The "secession" of these elites from national politics has created a global class of political dropouts whose only allegiance is to capitalism.¹⁰

In the United States the term Aliberal@ itself was almost totally marginalized during the Reagan/Bush years. Robert Reich=s humiliating account of the Dukakis campaign is highly instructive. He recalls how the Democratic presidential candidate aggressively denied he was a liberal until the last days of the campaign, when he was trailing his Republican opponent so badly that an admission of liberal tendencies no longer mattered.¹¹ Similarly Kevin Phillips, a former respected Republican adviser who became a fierce critic, nevertheless argued the only way to defeat the GOP was to avoid the "I" word and resort to an earlier Democratic tactic of proposing a new "economic nationalism".¹² As Michael Marzolini=s presentation for this conference demonstrates, the liberal stigma lingers on. Recent polling reveals barely 8% of American respondents identify themselves as liberals.

⁹ C. Lasch. *The Revolt of the Elites and The Betrayal of Democracy*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. 1995)

¹⁰ Robert Reich. *op. cit.* pp. 274-5

¹¹ Robert Reich. *loc. cit.*

¹² K. Phillips. *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the reagan Aftermath*. (New York: Harper Collins. 1991)

Marzolini's figure for the United States compares with the nearly 50% of Canadians who indicated in his poll that they would actively describe themselves as liberals. Other polls by Compass, Gallup and Ekos have found similar or even higher levels of support. Moreover, when Canadian respondents are asked to indicate their views of various liberal programs, rather than liberalism itself, this support increases. Proof that the majority of Canadians remain overwhelmingly liberal in their outlook can also be found in the analysis of the 2000 election campaign carried out by Blais, Gidengil and Nadeau. They found among other things that this was unquestionably a "values" election in which the campaigns of the major opponents -- the Liberals and the Alliance -- were focussed on defining quite different visions for the country, notably through the famous debate on health care.¹³

Yet since then Alliance Opposition and premiers Klein and Harris have managed to raise significant public doubts about the affordability of the health care plan as we now know it. These attacks have led increasing numbers of Canadians to consider dismantling the state program and/or to assume they cannot "afford" to invest in pharmacare or home care programs, environmental protection or infrastructure repair.

In my view this cause-and-effect relationship has been ignored by liberals for far too long. The result is a schizophrenic situation in which Canadians overwhelmingly support liberal values but believe they are not entitled to liberal programs reflecting these values to enhance their quality of life. Left unchallenged, neoconservative discourse will continue to eat away at the base of support for any future liberal programs and initiatives. Yet Canadians will respond positively if these programs are correctly framed. This means, first and foremost, that liberal *values* need to be defended, not altered. At the same time, and keeping in mind Reich's argument about the seemingly outdated nature of the traditional liberal Aparable, these values must be presented within the context of a coherent overarching framework, one that responds directly to the new realities of the postindustrial era and the arguments of the neoconservatives. Only by meeting these objectives will a liberal parable succeed in recapturing public imagination. One possible source of inspiration for this framework may be found in Europe, home of both liberalism and the welfare state.

Liberalism and Social Cohesion

Faced with many of the same economic and social problems as Canada, and deeply engaged in constructing a European identity for their own political integration project, Europe's leaders have adopted the discourse of social cohesion to heighten the legitimacy of their liberal initiatives. The specific impetus for this new approach was the growing social inequality apparent even as the economic integration of the Union was meeting with considerable success. In announcing the various provisions of the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Stability and Growth Pact, many of which were designed to combat this

¹³ A. Blais, E. Gidengil and R. Nadeau. *Making Sense of the Vote: The 2000 Canadian Election*. (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2002)

inequality, French President Francois Mitterand famously declared at the closing meeting of Heads of State that AEurope will have failed if the benefits of economic integration are not shared by all.@

The disconnect between the European Union=s economic and *political* integration projects also increased exponentially during the 1990=s, leading to the calls for a European constitution and Charter of Rights and eventually to the decision to establish a Convention on the Future of Europe. In this context another proposal being seriously examined by the Convention is the entrenchment of a Social Charter. This proposal clearly recognizes that the promotion of social cohesion can also produce beneficial results for political integration.

Not only the European Union but also the OECD and the Council of Europe have adopted the discourse of social cohesion. At the Council of Europe's Summit in October 1997 an intergovernmental body called the European Committee for Social Cohesion was created to develop and implement a Council-wide strategy for social cohesion. The press release announcing the Committee's creation was particularly blunt in making the linkages between economic and political integration. It stated that "social cohesion is an essential element for democratic security" and "divided societies are not only unjust but cannot guarantee stability in the long term." The Final Declaration of the Heads of State made the same point. It identified social cohesion as "one of the foremost needs of the wider Europe and an essential component to the promotion of human rights and dignity."

The emphasis which European politicians have placed on social cohesion as a *public good* is also noteworthy. Indeed, the use of the term Apublic interest@ is an important element of the social cohesion discourse. Liberal programs are explained and/or justified in terms of their ability to promote social cohesion, which in turn is seen as providing long-term benefits to all citizens. Perhaps most important, social programs are not justified simply as being cost-effective or good for economic growth. Actually the reverse is true. In Europe, economic growth is promoted as a means of achieving an improved quality of life, which is considered the ultimate objective of the state. This is clearly an approach which would resonate with Canadians.

New Approaches to Liberal Discourse

What conclusions can we draw from the preceding analysis? First, there is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The "new" liberalism does not need to reinvent liberal values, but it *does* need to construct a new discourse. Presenting a mix of programs without an overarching rationale or national purpose with which citizens can identify has not proven sufficient to counter neoconservative rhetoric, despite the excellent start made on the next "round" of liberal initiatives by the Chretien government through such measures as the National Child Benefit, the Millennium scholarships and the Canada Infrastructure Program. Similarly, whatever proposals come out of this conference concerning new social programs or a plan to ensure sustainable development and meet our Kyoto commitments will not receive widespread public support if they are not presented within the context of a liberal vision.

Second, I would argue that now is the ideal time to tackle this challenge. While the Chretien government was obliged to spend much of its mandate eliminating the deficit, the past few years of surplus have led Canadians to once again think of the possibilities of government. Moreover the shock of September 11 of last year has forced many of Reich's techno-elites to reconsider their allegiance to capitalism and the borderless society. This return to legitimacy for the state has been further heightened, of course, by the dot-com meltdown and the crisis of corporate governance. Not for more than a decade has the possibility of linking taxation positively to government programs been so obvious.

In his introductory paper for this conference Tom Axworthy has called for major increases in government spending on existing and new programs over the next decade in order to bring Canadians' into the 21st century. This spending would need to be financed in part by ensuring that there are no further reductions in taxation. While there may be differences of opinion among liberals on the relative merits of his specific proposals, few would disagree with his conclusion that there are many urgent areas requiring government investment to enhance our quality of life or even to prevent a deterioration in current standards. The question, as he later posed himself, is how to convince Canadians that this "decade of investment" is necessary?

Prime Minister Chretien has demonstrated that part of the answer lies in convincing Canadians that we are taking a "balanced" approach. Michael Marzolini's polling data bear this out. Liberals must find a way to counter the neoconservative critique that we "tax and spend", the clear implication of which is that there is no underlying purpose. Contrary to neoconservative critiques, Liberals are also prepared to encourage economic growth. Their underlying purpose, however, is not growth for growth's sake, but to enhance the quality of life of citizens -- in part by reducing disparities and promoting social cohesion.

In my view the concept of "investment for the future" is key to this turnaround in the liberal image, as are the concepts of collective or public good and what Galbraith has termed the "humane agenda". Perhaps the best current example of this balanced approach -- which has been the hallmark of Canadian liberalism -- can be found in the proposed broadband initiative, a project which has the potential not only to encourage economic competitiveness but also to ensure equality of opportunity and access for rural, northern and disadvantaged Canadians across the country. With apologies to Marshall McLuhan, I am essentially arguing that it is the message and not the medium that is important.

Michael Marzolini's paper for this conference notes that former prime minister Pierre Trudeau achieved the highest level of public support for liberal values, or liberal "branding", because of his ability to articulate these values in ways which resonated with Canadians, whether through initiatives such as the Charter or through concepts such as the "Just Society". I would add that it was also Trudeau, in his critical response to the "distinct society" provision of the Meech Lake Accord, who remarked that "*Canada* is the distinct society." For many Canadians this statement was self-evident. It is up to new liberal politicians to provide the leadership that will ensure Canadians continue to believe this is true.