



The Threat to Democratic Citizenship

by

Edward Broadbent

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Edward Broadbent is visiting fellow at the Arthur Kroeger School of Public Affairs, Carleton University. Mr. Broadbent is the former leader of the New Democratic Party. This presentation was made at the D.G. Willmot Lecture, Brock University, Spring 2002.

It is often said that the 1960s were the years of great change. The truth is that the real transformation had come earlier.

When I graduated from university in 1959, as a working class kid from Oshawa, I was full of optimism. I thought the world was my oyster – and I was right. Within a year my student debts were paid off and I never looked back. My friend, a fellow philosophy student from Brooklyn, had the same expectations. This was because 1959 was also the year that for the first time in their history, a majority of Americans identified themselves as being middle class.¹

By the end of the 1950s, Canadians and Americans had transformed themselves. During the previous two decades, as democratic peoples they had changed significantly in their views about the role of government and the nature of citizenship. Citizens in both countries no longer accepted high levels of inequality and insecurity as being inevitable. Following the world depression of the 1930s and World War Two, they and a crucially important group of political leaders had reached the conclusion that more equality and security were desirable and achievable.

Although I want to concentrate on Canadian citizenship for most of my talk it is worth emphasizing that for a brief period Americans and Canadians seemed to be taking the same direction. In fact, during the march towards greater equality in the middle third of the twentieth century, the Americans did much of the leading.

For those who admire contemporary American fiction and have read either John Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (the early passages) or Annie Proulx's remarkable *Accordion Crimes*, they will have seen how difficult life was in the United States for the

large majority, whether native born or immigrant, before the Roosevelt era. Between 1940 and 1959, something happened that had never occurred before in such a period of time. The real income for the average worker doubled.²

There are those in the United States and Canada who would have us believe this was simply due to the vigour of individual enterprise. I think they are mistaken. I believe the principal reason for the change in the human condition for the majority was the presence for the first time of a government committed to the equality of its citizens. For it was precisely this period that saw the emergence in the United States of programs and policies designed to achieve this goal.

Beginning in 1935 with his social security program (the model for our Canada Pension Plan which came 30 years later), Franklin Roosevelt launched a series of initiatives that transformed the life of the average American. In addition to universal pensions there were housing programs, unemployment insurance, municipal works, money for the arts, loan guarantees, tax-subsidized mortgages and tuition-free state university education.

Laissez-faire was replaced with ongoing governmental activism on both sides of the border. In 1937, as a percentage of GDP, government spending in Canada was a mere 18.6 percent. By the end of the 1950s, it had risen to 28.6 percent. In the United States, the transformation was even more significant. Starting at a lower 8.6 percent, governmental expenditure grew by more than 300 percent, ending up over the same period at virtually the same level as Canada.³ By the time of my graduation, Canadian citizens were beginning to think of themselves as sharing and caring. And most Americans no longer felt class-divided. In each case, economic growth played a role. But the major reason is to be found in the many govern-

ment programs designed specifically to achieve higher levels of equality within that growth.

By 1961, a young John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address could confidently say to his fellow citizens: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” I believe that he was able to make this idealistic appeal with credibility because millions of his fellow citizens had grown up with a government that already had demonstrated that it cared for them. In January 2002, President G.W. Bush, reflecting four decades of steady decline in government participation in citizens’ lives, could successfully invoke patriotism only in going to war. Significantly, George Bush *would not want* to invoke government expansion for almost any other aspect of life. By the time he was elected, Americans had long since abandoned their commitment to greater economic equality. Canada had moved well ahead of the United States in social spending. In the pre-Bush decades, American politicians talked increasingly about taxpayers and consumers and less about citizens. I don’t believe this to be accidental.

Democratic Citizenship

Citizenship means to hold the rights and have the obligations of membership in a political community. In the Western tradition, this has taken place within either a city or a nation state. The Athenians and the Romans were flourishing examples of the former. Today virtually all the world’s citizens are members of nation states – although many see us evolving towards something quite new, namely global citizenship or citizenship without borders. I want, however, to focus on the nation state, and to talk not just about citizenship but about democratic citizenship.

Democratic citizenship is really quite recent in history. Because women and slaves

were excluded from political life, the ancient Greek cities were never real democracies. However, they did give us the core *idea* of democratic citizenship that has remained with us to this day. For the Greeks, a democracy meant that *all* adults must be included on an equal basis in governing, and that governing itself would consist of a continuing political effort to achieve greater equality in the substance of life for all of the citizens and their families.

However, in the actual development of real, modern democratic societies, what we today call representative democracy did not begin in a state of equality. Quite the contrary. Our democracies evolved from within pre-existing authoritarian nation states. The right to vote evolved from the top down, not from the bottom up. And it did so very much on a class basis. Although democratic reformers often invoked the language of equality, in actual practice those with power made concessions (normally after great conflict) on the basis of income or property. The more of each you had, the more you could be relied upon to support the status quo. In most of today’s democracies, men who worked as labourers on farms or in factories didn’t get the vote until near the end of the nineteenth century. Voting rights for women came after World War One. In France they were excluded until after World War Two. The same is true for Canada’s Aboriginal peoples.

It is only very recently that we talk about the full and equal rights of *all* citizens. Indeed, in Britain, it was just a few years ago that Tony Blair finally suggested the British should stop talking about themselves as ‘subjects’ and start using the equality language of citizenship. In retrospect, it is not hard to understand why equal political citizenship was so slow in coming about. Those with power understood the original idea of democracy very well. In plain terms, it meant if you give ordinary people the right to vote they would probably use that right as the Greeks and

nineteenth century democratic reformers said they would: to equalize conditions in society. If you were a British landowner, a French merchant or a German industrialist, this was not an enticing prospect. Here in Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald, our first prime minister, favoured an unelected Senate which he saw as protecting minorities. Rich Canadians, he pointed out, would always be a minority. In the United States, James Madison (a Founding Father) had defended a new federal constitution in part because he saw it as an effective check on majority rule which, if unchecked, could result in pressure to redistribute property – a ‘fault’ he associated with democracies.⁴

By and large, most Liberals and Conservatives in the nineteenth century had opposed democratic citizenship until the very last moment. Outstanding figures like John Stuart Mill were the exception. Although he had some concerns, he saw democracy not only as inevitable and equalizing, but as desirable. Mill saw democratic equality as a foundation for a great future on this planet. He believed equal political rights for all men and women would lead to the liberation and education of millions of ordinary people. He wanted them to participate actively in their societies, to develop their skills and talents, to create new science and write great novels. Equality and human liberty were to go hand in hand. As Mill pointed out, no one at birth should be deemed to have a greater claim on the world’s resources than anyone else. In making our way in the world, equality, he reasonably asserted, should be the norm. In a democracy, it was inequality that required justification. He took it for granted that a democratic government would work to achieve greater levels of equality in society.

What, you may well ask, does all this have to do with Canadian citizenship a century and a half later? By offering this crude sketch about the root meaning of democracy, about how

democratic citizenship and equality were originally thought to go hand in hand, I want to emphasize that for a brief, glorious moment in the middle of the twentieth century, real live politics in virtually all of the world’s representative democracies actually measured up to the original ideal. In Western Europe and in North America, the bright candle of human equality seemed to inspire all but a reactionary few. My friend from Brooklyn and I were fortunate to come of age at the right moment. The candle has since almost gone out in America and is flickering today in Canada. What happened? What can be done about it?

In retrospect, the broad outlines are clear. The Great Depression and World War Two shook up the thinking of a whole generation and their politicians. They responded with humanity and creativity. They realized that, left on its own, a market economy leads to deepening insecurity and inequality. And that precisely because of this, democracy itself became threatened – as it did in the 1930s. The governments of Churchill and Roosevelt planned for the long run and attempted to expand the institutional foundation of the democratic state. Churchill’s coalition government with Labour decided that a new set of social and economic rights should be established in Britain after the war and should become part of a new global order. Roosevelt was in strong agreement. In his last presidential address to the American people (January 11, 1944), he became the one and only president to argue that political and civil rights were “inadequate to assure [Americans] equality in the pursuit of happiness.” He appealed unsuccessfully to Congress for an Economic Bill of Rights, believing a high degree of real equality was essential if there was to be equal opportunity in the pursuit of happiness. His remarkable wife, Eleanor, went on to be the leading public exponent of the need for the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In Canada, prodded on by provincial electoral success and a national public opinion poll favouring the CCF in 1945, Mackenzie King committed the federal government to building higher levels of equality. In continental Western Europe, social democratic and Christian Democratic parties combined their energies in laying the world's strongest institutional foundations linking equality with democratic citizenship.

In general terms, the prime ministers in Canada I grew up with in my university years, John Diefenbaker and Lester Pearson, broadened the foundation of our political heritage by adding to the democratically crucial social dimension. This was extended again during most of the years when Pierre Trudeau and Robert Stanfield led the Liberal and Conservative parties. During the four decades after World War Two, our notion of democratic citizenship moved well beyond political and civil rights to include social and economic rights. Although not always expressed in the abstract language of rights, politicians and voters alike came to understand that true freedom for ordinary citizens had to involve more equality and less insecurity in society. It involved both private and public goods. Formal political and civil rights can mean little in the daily life of citizens if social and economic circumstances effectively reduce or even deny their use by the majority. The equal right to pursue your own happiness can mean very little to poor kids unless there are strong public systems of education and health care.

Thus the goals of Canadian citizenship came to include adequate pensions for seniors, universal health care, improved Unemployment Insurance, unions in the public and private sectors, redistributive income tax policies and high spending on education including the expectation that children from lower-income families would be able to gain access to university. Without

exception, such goals mean governments must intervene to alter what would otherwise be the unequal effects of a market-based economy.

During the Trudeau years, both in the Constitution Act of 1982 and in legislative measures, other equality concerns led to affirmative action programs for women and visible minorities, the protection of our two official languages, support for multicultural programs and the entrenchment of Aboriginal rights in the Constitution. I emphasize again not only was there an abstract or formal commitment to obtain greater equality in citizenship, it was also seen that a democratic government and the courts had an obligation to intervene both in the economy and in traditional patterns of behaviour, to make it happen.

Although we did have serious disagreements on some issues, on most matters during this period the differences between myself as a social democrat and Mr. Trudeau and Mr. Stanfield were mostly about speed and detail – not principle. All three believed a just Canada meant a more equal Canada. When it comes to democratic citizenship, I think the three of us would have achieved consensus on the following claims and values. First, a market economy is desirable as an expression of free choice and for the innovative production of most goods and services. Second, in a democracy, reliance on the market for many activities – education, health, culture and the environment – is not good either because the market mechanism is inherently unequal in its effects or because certain non-commercial values are worth protecting for their own sake. Finally, we would have agreed that by the mid-1980s Canada had become a vastly improved democracy compared to 1945: There was more real freedom in more people's lives because politicians had taken care to ensure that the benefits of economic growth were shared. Canadians had, indeed,

become a nation of citizens who shared and cared. While desiring a market economy, we were, unlike our American neighbours, rejecting a market society.

Pressure to change

For a variety of interconnected reasons, most developed democracies including Canada had accumulated unacceptable levels of debt by the mid-1970s. These reasons include the impact of much higher world prices for oil, demographic changes in the population and the simultaneous experience of high inflation and high unemployment which had led to lower growth rates in the economy. In Western continental Europe, appropriate adjustments were made but the ongoing commitment to the goal of equal citizenship based on strong social programs and high levels of taxation remained. However, in Britain and Canada, a new generation of ideologically driven political leaders emerged who used the occasion to turn back history. They began an assault on our equality-based social programs in particular and government in general – and did so in a vocabulary that combined simplistic economic slogans with attacks on the very idea of social citizenship. They proposed nostrums, not solutions. Consider their list of claims and promises. I think you will find them familiar.

- In order to have higher national productivity, we must have lower taxes and less government.
- Reducing the level of government activity will lead to an increase in citizen voluntary participation.
- If we want less inequality and poverty, we must simply let the market grow on its own, unhampered by government involvement.

- Universal social programs are too costly, are inefficient and reduce our competitiveness in an increasingly globalized marketplace.

Recently, an additional fifth claim has been made by this new generation of politicians. They began to tell us that universal health care – by far our most successful, equalizing and popularly supported social program – is no longer sustainable.

An interesting fact about all of these claims is that not a single one is true. They are simply assertions. None of them can be supported by credible evidence. When you look at the evidence, plainly available here in Canada and abroad, a quite different picture emerges in comparison to what they have told us.

Take the five assertions one at a time.

- During the 1990s Austria, Germany and the Netherlands (among others) kept the high level of taxes needed to maintain strong social programs. Did their productivity go down? Quite the contrary. During this period, their productivity increases actually equalled or exceeded those of the United States and Canada.
- Instead of going up when governments slashed billions of dollars from social programs during the 1990s, volunteerism in Canada underwent a serious decline by the end of the decade. In fact, citizen participation in society and politics is much stronger in Scandinavian states than in any other country. Not coincidentally, the Scandinavians have the world's strongest social programs.
- In spite of claims by the federal government and those of Alberta and Ontario that poverty and inequality would be looked after by

leaving the economy to grow on its own, during the 1990s the opposite occurred. High levels of economic growth in Canada were actually accompanied by a widening of the gap between average and rich families and significant increases in the numbers of poor. During this 10-year period, while the number and percentage of poor children in Canada went up almost every year, five Western European countries virtually eliminated child poverty.

Instead of universal social programs invariably reducing a nation's economic competitiveness, in many cases they actually improve it. Not only has this been shown theoretically by Anthony Atkinson at Oxford University and the Swede Bo Rothstein, in practice the so-called Asia tigers consciously applied this understanding in building their dynamic economies. Here in Canada, our own spending on universal health care not only costs less per capita in comparison with spending on health insurance in the United States. Their higher level of spending also leaves 40 million Americans with no health insurance whatever. Furthermore, the recent decision by Daimler-Chrysler to put a multi-million dollar new production facility in Windsor instead of Detroit was strongly influenced by the fact that, by doing so, they will save millions of dollars each year. Why? In part because of the lower value of the Canadian dollar but also because in the United States companies in this and many other sectors have to pay for the health insurance of every employee – a cost which does not exist for them in Canada. In short, medicare gives us a competitive advantage in attracting industry.

Finally, the cost of health care. It is not the case that we must give up as 'unsustainable' our current public health care system. That so many Canadians apparently believe the opposite is a triumph of propaganda over truth. Contrary to what so many of the new politicians and

editorial writers want us to believe, government spending on health as a percentage of GDP is *lower* today than it was a decade ago. If we want to improve the system, more money *is* part of the answer. And clearly we can afford it. If medicare is threatened, it is primarily the fault of Jean Chrétien, Mike Harris, Ralph Klein and now Gordon Campbell. During the past decade, they treated us as consumers, not citizens. They preferred to give us billions in tax breaks and starve what many experts continue to regard as the world's best health care system. They created the so-called financial crisis and now have the nerve to tell us something is wrong.

In every way on every day, there is increased pressure to take us back to a concept of Canadian citizenship shorn of equality. We live in a Canada in which social and economic rights are struggling for survival, a Canada in which the law of the jungle is being promoted as the way of the world. Canadian citizenship as envisaged by Pierre Trudeau, Bob Stanfield and Tommy Douglas has been replaced with a new barbarism. I choose my word with care. One of the meanings of 'barbarism' is the absence of civilized standards. We are abandoning such standards. We are now reverting to an old concept of citizenship, one based on the assumption that we humans are primarily competitive with one another, that we are not merely self-interested but also selfish. We are being told that we must rebuild our social and political institutions on these divisive assumptions.

Any novelist or sociologist knows such a simplistic view of human nature is false. In fact, when you think about it, we all know it's false. We know that we care for ourselves and our families. But we also care for our neighbours. We want economic rewards based on performance. But we also work for nothing within our communities – coaching teams, fundraising for the arts and supporting the victims of AIDS. We want our companies to be

economically successful but we also insist that they respect human rights and protect the environment. We have many entirely personal desires and appetites. But we also have created more than 175,000 voluntary organizations and by government action we established equality-based social programs in health care and pensions and education. Yes, we want personal cash to go to the movies, to buy a computer and to have holidays with our kids. But we also have demonstrated in poll after poll that we willingly will pay more taxes to rebuild Medicare and to adequately fund our universities, so students don't have to acquire debt burdens averaging \$25,000.

In all of these illustrations, we Canadians demonstrate that our individualism is not necessarily in competition with the social good. This is because *our* kind of individualism recognizes we are also social beings. It does not reject, but embraces cooperation. Human identities are complex and multidimensional. As I have said, we want a market-based economy, but not a market-driven society.

Many of the new politicians now say bluntly that we must choose between economic growth and social justice. They increasingly point to the United States as a model. Yes, that is one option. It is true that we can have high levels of growth with cutbacks in programs for average Canadians, much suffering for the poor and an overall increase in inequality.

The other road is to reassert our humanity, to remind ourselves that we Canadians truly flourished in the middle of the twentieth century when we strove for national economic success but did so by embracing at the same time the democratic citizen's goal of equality. We *are* at a crossroad. The civilized option is to join hands

with the Swedes and Germans and Austrians and Danes and Dutch and Norwegians who never abandoned their post-war dual commitment to equality of citizenship and economic success. Today they are doing well in the globalized economy. We can too.

There is no determinism. We can decide. We Canadians who are prosperous and have benefited from what others did in the past can remain silent or we can join in the struggle for justice. It is easy to point to the difficulties and suggest that in the end attempting to change what is wrong can be quite futile. Passivity and cynicism have always come easily to the educated and prosperous.

In Anton Chekhov's short story, *Ward No. 6*, there is an exchange between a so-called madman and a self-satisfied doctor. The doctor's philosophy of life contains no need to go beyond a life of personal satisfaction. He remains indifferent to the problems of his community. At one point, the madman becomes furious. He says to the doctor:

You tried to shape your life so that nothing would trouble you or make you stir from your place... You sat around warm and peaceful, saving up money, reading books, delighting yourself with all sorts of nonsense... A convenient philosophy: no need to do anything, and your conscience is clear, and you feel yourself a wise man... No, sir, that's not philosophy, not thinking, not breadth of vision, it's laziness, fakirism, a dreamy stupor.⁵

We Canadians need to put fakirism to one side and as citizens once again engage in the ongoing struggle for equality.

Endnotes

1. J. Madrick. (1996). "Social Security and Its Discontents." New York Review of Books, December.
2. R.N. Bellah, R. Madsen, W. Sullivan, A. Swidler and S. Tipton (1991) point out in *The Good Society* [New York: A. Knopf] that between 1940 and 1959 the real income of the majority of Americans doubled.
3. These figures come from *The Economist*, September 20, 1997.
4. J. Madison. *The Federalist*, No.10. www.leftjustified.org
5. A. Chekhov. (2000). "Ward No. 6." In *Stories*. New York: Bantam Books, pp. 199-200.