



The Strategic Counsel

## "Public Opinion, Government and Citizenship"

Notes for Remarks By Allan R. Gregg  
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# “PUBLIC OPINION, GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENSHIP”

A SPEECH BY ALLAN R. GREGG TO THE CANADIAN CLUB – MAY 20, 2003; TORONTO, ONTARIO

We live in a time of moral relativism. Every idea, behaviour and habit carries a weight, worthy of equal consideration, and is supposed to be as acceptable as any other. Indeed, many consider this the hallmark of an enlightened, pluralistic, open-minded society.

When you look at our public opinion data however, there is one area where unequivocal judgementalism seems to be not only accepted, but the norm.

Today, regardless of socio-economic status or ideological perspective, the electorate appears to be uniformly disdainful of politicians, governments and state activity.

The business class has prospered during this climate and seems to be defending it more vigorously, than ever before. Young people and social activists believe non-government channels are more effective in advancing their interests. The poor now actually fear government and see the state standing idly by as our social safety net unravels. And the vast middle class, in between, have concluded that politicians are nothing more than rapacious provocateurs who abuse their shrinking tax dollars.

Any challenge to these “truisms” is deemed at best fringe and at worst delusional. Within this illogical morass, we rarely hear a dissenting voice or alternative vision to what amounts to intellectual jihad. Silence has become consent.

Yet, in complete juxtaposition to this view, we routinely gather together, as we have here today, because we seek the sense and benefits of belonging that comes only in a group.



Whether by nature or through experience, we have also learned that group activity has a more practical purpose – simply put, we can accomplish more together than alone. Indeed, within only a very few limits, the larger the task we seek to accomplish, the larger the group we find it necessary to form.

Need a pot hole in the road fixed? The neighbours will do. Alleviate traffic congestion? Now it will be necessary to enlist everyone who uses the roads in the congested area. Fight the war on terrorism? Probably wise to engage the whole world?

Gathering together to satisfy human needs, of course, is the central integrating concept modern civilization has used to pursue societal goals and move society forward – it is nothing less than the basis and rationale for creating communities and governments.

In fact, while you rarely hear anyone talk about it anymore, when we organize into groups it also has an enabling effect on our character and behaviour.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau made this point, eloquently, 340 years ago when he wrote *The Social Contract*...

*“the passage ... to civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct and giving his actions the morality they had formerly lacked. Then only, when the voice of duty takes the place of physical impulses and right of appetite, does man ... find that he is forced to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations”.*

An explicit part of the “contract” Rousseau immortalized, is that in exchange for the benefits of community, we voluntarily surrender some of the unbridled freedom we would otherwise possess if we lived apart. We erect a stop sign that delays our arrival to our desired destination, but we do so willingly, to avoid head-on collisions.

As I advise clients or comment on current events, I am often struck by how often people I otherwise admire seem to give short shrift to this fundamental aspect of our social organization – that community, duty and restraint produces not only more efficient results than we could achieve alone, but it also breeds better citizens and better human beings – that there is a moral imperative that forms the basis of our gathering together and not simply a utilitarian and practical one.



That this rarely forms a central part of our zeitgeist is evidenced not simply in our lack of voiced appreciation of this fact, but increasingly in the very way we live our lives.

Robert Putman, among others, has documented our growing propensity to “bowl alone”. His thesis is that while bowling is as popular as ever, the number of bowling leagues and teams has decreased by 40% in the last three decades. So too has the incidence of family get-togethers, having friends over for dinner, memberships in parent-teacher associations and almost any other group bridging and bonding activity that may bring citizens together into a sense of community.

More than a nostalgic harkening back to a better time however, this research makes clear that our lack of contact with our neighbours reduces a community’s social capital – that sense of shared and common destiny. The diminution of this sense – a social capital deficit – in turn, leads to the erosion of mutual support, co-operation, trust and even, institutional effectiveness.

Imagine yourself driving down an urban street, where you feel no kinship with your fellow travellers, on your way to the bank. The driver next to you fails to let you in when you realize you are in the wrong turning lane. The message of this social interaction is clear -- this stranger feels his or his interests are different than yours – that their destination is more important than yours. Horns may blare, fingers might be flipped. And a lesson is learned.

When you arrive at the bank, there are no parking spaces, so you double park. Traffic backs up behind you, and everyone gets to work in a fierce mood, a few minutes later than they otherwise would. A by-product of this ugly episode is that everyone involved may come away feeling that traffic by-laws don’t work and need not be heeded at all times.

That is what the balance sheet of a social capital deficit looks like. And while common courtesy and obedience to traffic laws may seem like trivial problems, this is where our sense of bond begins to break down and where the effectiveness of our institutions starts to deteriorate.

In a more optimistic way, Putman’s research also indicates that when citizens actually are brought in contact with one another towards a common cause or purpose, there is documentably, less violent crime, higher educational performance, and lower levels of teen pregnancy, better health and even higher personal incomes.

This notion is neither revolutionary, speculative, nor new. Almost two centuries ago, de Tocqueville noted that when “a citizen ... isolate(s) himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw(s) into the circle of (only) family and friends; with this



little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself”.

Indeed, Putman traces the entire hollowing out of our democratic institutions, loss of faith in political leaders and even declining voting turnout, back to our less frequent social intercourse with our neighbours.

While I have very little doubt that these two things are related, I wonder whether Putman may have confused cause with effect.

In other words, there is a very strong argument that it is not our increasing tendency to “bowl alone” that has led to our loss of faith in the political system; but instead, it is our growing cynicism about the utility of our governments and the effectiveness of our elected leaders that leads to our increasing isolation from one another, and our reluctance to tackle the problems we share as members of a community.

Think about it.

Any poll I might care to conduct would find that Canadians, virtually to a person, report that they want homelessness eradicated, the environment protected, and disparities between the richest and poorest reduced. This being the case, how then do we explain the continued presence of the homeless in our midst; the systematic degradation of our environment and scarce resources; the stunning accumulation of individual wealth in the face of heartbreaking third world poverty?

Given the reputed power of public opinion, why does government not respond to these wishes with concerted effort and bold measures? Even more curiously, if this is what the public wants, why do we not hear a hue and cry when these problems persist and become more intractable?

The fact is that while these may be the responses given in polls, they are rarely heard in public debates or translated into direct demands on government for action. Rather, what we find is a public who has come to accept that the homeless are just “there”, the deterioration of environment is accepted as part of the normal course of events, and the world is just “as it is”.

Canadians – at least at an intellectual level – know what kind of community and society they want but seem to have stopped asking for it. Along side this; they have concluded that government is incapable or unwilling to produce the results they desire. Consequently, we not only fail to express these views, we have ceased to even frame these questions as part of our civic dialogue.



As far as we can tell, the decline in faith in political authority has its root in the late 1970's when the great experiments of post-war liberalism began to show some early cracks. The creation of a seamless welfare state failed to eradicate poverty; a collection of publicly owned agencies and corporations were unable to deliver services or compete effectively with their private sector counterparts; and the limitless opportunities of the 50s and 60s began to shrink at the very same time that the public sector accelerated its interventionist activities.

In its wake, governments were left with bloated deficits; taxpayers' discretionary income shrank as government revenues grew; and problems believed to be in the purview of government deepened and became more complex.

As they looked to themselves rather than to government and government-sponsored solutions, this increasingly well-educated electorate became more efficacious and defiant. A vigilant and aggressive press, fuelled by greater emphasis on investigative journalism, routinely exposed the shortcomings, foibles and missteps of our elected leaders.

As a consequence, where once prime ministers and members of parliament were venerated, by the mid 80's, they had become either the source of disdain or the butt of lunchroom jokes. Where once the electorate looked to government as not only the arbiter, but often as the main provider of the public good, the state became associated with waste, inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

As E. J. Dionne observed some years ago in *Why Americans Hate Politics*, people were willing to tolerate a great deal of unpleasantness in politics when they saw the political process as productive.

By the 1990's, Canadians had come to conclude that politics' productive capacity had virtually collapsed.

By the end of the millennium, rather than look to government to guide the public interest, all that was demanded from government was that it become more "efficient".

Even if you accept this analysis, I recognize it still begs another set of inevitable questions... "Why should we even care about this?" "Who wants to return to the bad old days of excessive government intervention and decision-making by elite accommodation?" "Are we not better off....more efficacious and self-reliant, less deluded.... by coming to the realization that we had misplaced our faith in governmental authority and instead began turning to a new found reliance on ourselves"?



Judged against the temper of our times, these are not merely rhetorical questions. They have become questions that we no longer feel any need to pose; after all ... if you have no faith in authority, their loss of relevance is really no loss at all.

The disturbing aspect of this analysis, of course, is that it suggests an almost complete disconnect between the public and the output of public policy – an electorate who has come to believe that what government does has little bearing on their lives or impact on their community.

I term this as disturbing because when we come to view government and government initiatives as irrelevant, we cease to make demands on government to improve our lives and communities. Even worse, we lose the capacity to use ethical considerations to judge the output of government and how we are being governed. From there, it is a small step before we stop even asking what kind of community we want and value. In the end, we cascade toward a society of meaninglessness.

Put in a broader context however, I think there is evidence that we should be even more worried about what affect these views have on the very foundations of democracy.

American pastor and theologian, Reinhold Niebuhur may have sent out this caution best, when he said.... *"man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but his inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary"*.

Niebuhur's point of course is that the power we grant our elected officials is not only a necessary cornerstone of civil society, it is also clearly far too powerful, important and therefore potentially dangerous, to be left without vigil.

Ultimately this vigil must come from the citizenry itself; informed and engaged by a free and equally vigilant press.

Recent research we are conducting on behalf of the Canadian Journalism Foundation made it abundantly clear that, once you get past surface cynicism that can be directed towards the press as well, Canadians actually have a deep and abiding understanding of the essential rationale of why a free press exists, and are able to articulate its purpose in almost Jeffersonian terms.

In their own way, Canadians acknowledge the role the press plays in encouraging empathy, joining citizens together and providing the raw material for social interaction.



In short, the public recognizes that the press truly constitutes a fourth estate in society – that it is a central part of the interwoven fabric that makes up a civil, stable and free culture. More personally, they also acknowledge how paramount the press is in arming them with the tools necessary to protect themselves and hold arbitrary authority in check.

When the press fails to live up to these lofty standards, the population sees their defense as merely... "we are just giving our audiences what they want". This defense however, is precisely what fuels cynicism towards the press.

In sum, Canadians seem to understand that even if their instincts are base, their needs are not. Accordingly, they look to the press to rise above the lowest common denominator and perform a higher role.

So where are we going with all this?

That the press deserve whatever public approbation they receive? That the media are to blame for the low regard in which our politicians and the political process are held?

No. The point is that while it may be debatable as to how big a role the press has played in creating this problem, there is no question (in my mind at least) that it most certainly should be part of the solution.

Make no mistake, however. This is not a one-way street. Politicians themselves have become equally culpable in setting a standard of conduct that amounts to a spiral to the bottom.

If I was Burger King and I wanted to gain market share, the single most effective claim I could make was that McDonald's hamburgers were rife with botulism. MacDonald's, in turn, could counter that Burger King's kitchens were infested with e-coli and this would erode their competitor's advantage quite quickly.

While brutally effective, this would never happen. And it would never happen, because both McDonald's and Burger King know that to participate in this type of marketing eventually would destroy the category – that consumers would lose faith in the entire fast-food industry and, in time, would stop buying hamburgers, altogether.

Yet, in politics this is happening all the time. Negative advertising, unsubstantiated allegations and character innuendo have not only become the norm in politics today, these tactics are now considered the most effective way of gaining political ground on your opponents.



This occurs in no small measure because, for whatever their failures, politicians and governments have never lost their ability to read the shifting public mood and the temper of our times. Rather than defend themselves and paddle against the current of public opinion, politicians have fed this cynicism. Government has responded by scaling back the scope of its activities to correspond more closely to the public's reduced expectations.

Far from reversing the loss of faith in public institutions, this response has simply reinforced the notion that politicians are venal and governments are incapable of acting as positive agents of social change.

The entire process has resulted in what Thomas Frank refers to as "the train wreck ideal": persuade the public that government is bad by giving us spectacularly bad government. Today, 15 years of government responding to the lowered and cynical expectations of the public with lower and more cynical performance, has served little purpose other than to excavate an even larger chasm between government and the electorate.

This is the cascading effect of turning our back on the government as the principle vehicle through which society's major aspirations are satisfied. It begins with cynicism towards our institutions; grows into indifference towards their outputs; and robs us of the desire to make ethical considerations an essential part of political debate.

Rather than feel we have a kinship and responsibility to that homeless man on our street corner, we step around him.

Not only does this weaken the moral fabric and social cohesion of our culture, this spiral towards meaninglessness is also dangerous and leaves us open to the vagaries of arbitrary authority.

What happens if, ultimately, through our own cascading cynicism, we drive out the best - those who value their character the most; those who have accomplished the most and therefore have the most to lose - then surely, we will attract those who agree that the process is inherently flawed and corrupt; and those who hope to benefit from its flaws and corruption, as a result.

The fact is that no matter how some may try to persuade us otherwise, the state has power. The political process maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Parliament can declare that men are women or that dogs can vote. Only through the state can we allocate society's scarce resources.



To make this case is not a polemic or a wish on my part. This is an inherent part of the bargain we strike when we give up our unbridled, individual freedom in exchange for collective safety, stability and civic society.

When we enter into this agreement, we also give the state the authority to do evil – as well as good. And because this bargain is the essential contract between the governed and those who govern, it means that the state is not an abstraction and can never be irrelevant to its citizens. The state and government is not “them”. It is “us”.

So, if you believe, as I do, that the loss of faith in political authority is linked to the reduction of social capital in our community; and that this deficit results in a breakdown in civil cohesion and our ability to think morally about the kind of society we want; and that this cascading effect invariably opens us up to the prey of those who might abuse a discredited system; and if you believe and, I do, having plumed public opinion for the last 30 years – that we actually do care about the homeless, the quality of our environment and believe we are each other’s keeper; shouldn’t someone be asking how this cycle can be broken?

Invariably, breaking this cycle begins by those who believe in the political system and care about the character and quality of those who we choose to govern, standing up and defending the process.

In fact, the research we are analyzing now tells me that this need has never been more pressing.

In the last 18 months, the Canadian public opinion agenda has become considerably more multi-layered, complex and difficult to manage.

We see the electorate experiencing a joyless prosperity. Reports of personal, financial well-being are at a near, all-time high, yet optimism towards the future has been steadily tracking downward.

Concerns about personal safety and security still linger from September 11<sup>th</sup>. Many – and especially those who feel more vulnerable in society – believe that, without repair, our social safety net will soon be in tatters.

With indicators like the NASDAQ reflecting a mere 30 percent of its value three years ago, the markets do not look quite so triumphant, today. With issues like Walkerton, Enron and airport security still part of our collective memory, the inherent efficiency of the private sector has been cast in serious doubt.



All tolled, we see a growing consensus around problems yet no consensus around possible solutions.

Canadians display no appetite for a return to the old days of excessive government spending, regulation or intrusion.

Make no mistake however; on the other hand, we are also witnessing a reconnection to our historic, collectivist impulse and an understanding that, in this unsettled and complex environment, our fortunes will rise and fall together.

The lesson of September 11<sup>th</sup> is that planes scything into office towers do not discriminate between rich and poor or right and left.

And if the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> have taught us anything, it is that there is a public interest and if we are to protect it, it will sometimes be necessary for private need to take a back seat.

While they are unable to articulate precisely what role they want for government – and continue to have grave doubts about whether government has the creativity, resources and will to tackle new problems in new ways – we are witnessing an electorate that – for the first time in almost two decades – is beginning to believe that government may be part of the solution mix.

We should not fear this change in outlook, but welcome it.

What is the alternative?

Would we have farmers decide grain tariffs? Businesses dictate minimum wage laws? Banks set interest rates? Or Greenpeace determine forest policy?

Through politics, these groups can come together and make their voices heard and their positions known. But in the end, it must be government – as the crucible of consensus – who takes these divergent positions and needs, and forges a common cause around the public interest.

Robert Dahl gave us one of our most classic definitions of politics – the process of determining “who gets what, when and how”. But for those of us who have toiled in the trenches of politics, it is also much more than that. Politics is not merely a zero sum game where my benefit becomes your liability. Politics – by its nature – is the vehicle we use to uplift and advance whole communities and societies towards a better end.



This then is the challenge for those who believe in the political process. To galvanize a consensus where none exists today – to define a role for government that is dynamic and legitimate, but less intrusive, ham-handed and all knowing than governments of old.

And surely in a world as educated, as prosperous, as technologically advanced – yet also as imperilled as it is – we can get beyond the divisive and out-dated cold war notions that governments must either support free markets or stand in the way of individual freedoms.

I have every confidence that with the proper resolve, we can define a role where governments are seen as our agents and not as foreign adversaries, disconnected from our aspirations. Governments that can be activist in their own right, but also empower and work side by side with society's other stakeholders to pursue their own goals within a framework of public good. Governments that attract the absolute best of our citizens – those who are attracted by public duty and not just the power they invariably wield.

This is the full essence of politics. This is a view that says politics is productive, not simply distributive.

Who is hurt or disadvantaged by a better educated population, a cleaner environment, a war waged against childhood obesity or a more equal and compassionate society?

Oh, I hear some say .... Better education may mean more taxes – especially for those most able to pay; a cleaner environment may mean higher costs or reduced production for the manufacturing and resource sector; fighting childhood obesity could very well hurt the fast food and packaged goods industry.

But that is the price we pay for the kind of society we want. We sublimate private need for public good; and in the process, we gain better communities, more stability and a civil character. We are making an investment in our social capital account.

I also believe, at the end of the day, if we show the resolve and creativity to march forward and solve these problems, there will be no losers. In fact, I would submit that business, high income earners and those most currently resistant to the notion that government can – with bold ideas and new approaches – once again be a creative agency of public good, stand to benefit equally – if not even more – than those who may be the direct recipient of such initiatives.



Why? Because it is always the private sector and the best-off who flourish most in a healthy, vibrant and stable democracy. That is the soil that provides sustenance for our best and our brightest.

But if we continue to ignore this fundamental tenet of politics, we inevitably will lose our capacity to organize society towards the ultimate ethical goal – namely, generating the greatest good for the largest number.

I submit to you that the cost of that loss is nothing less than the loss of a free and democratic society. And if that is the end of the path we are following, I also believe that there will be no beneficiaries on that journey.

Thank you.