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Religious Perspectives Being Marginalized in Canada

John Milloy*

A few weeks ago a former colleague from Queen's Park paid me a compliment. He said that they missed my interventions during internal policy discussions. He reminded me that when things got a little too scattered or enthusiastic, I would often interrupt the flow by asking a very simple question: "What is all this about?" What exactly is the specific problem we are trying to address through this policy, initiative or funding decision?

It is an interesting exercise to try to distil major policy decisions down to a basic question and then try to answer it. Why do we need full-day kindergarten? What were the problems in the tax system that made the HST necessary? What obstacles for patients will be removed if we fund family health teams?

I thought interventions of that nature were helpful. It was so easy at Queen's Park to become tied up in details and strategies that we could lose sight of what precisely we were trying to accomplish. Asking what the real problem was gave our discussion focus, helped us honestly to assess the proposal in front of us and, once a decision was made, helped us explain it to the folks back home.

On a personal note, interventions like that were also helpful because they allowed me to speak with an air of wisdom and authority without really knowing anything about the issue at hand.

So today, in my remarks about my new joint role at the Seminary and the University, I thought I would take a minute and go through the same exercise. I want to try to answer the question, "What is all this about?" What are the problems I hope to address, in my own small way, through my future work here?

Coming from the world of politics, I find there is of course no shortage of challenges. Our political system appears to be in free-fall. Voter turnout and engagement is embarrassingly low. In fact, it is hard to believe that we actually cheered when voter turnout increased in the last provincial election, not because we shouldn't be pleased with any increase, but because it ended up at just a little over 52%. This meant that close to half of eligible voters still stayed home.

Respect for public officials has cratered. A recent poll commissioned by the Think Tank Samara found that only 40% of Canadians trust their M.P. to do what is right and only 42% put their trust in political parties.¹ And, beyond the numbers, there is a general sense that all is not right in the world of politics and government. Although I recognize the

* Lecture delivered at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo, Ontario Canada, April 8, 2015 at a reception welcoming John Milloy as Co-Director of the Centre for Public Ethics and Assistant Professor of Public Ethics at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary as well as the inaugural Practitioner in Residence in the Department of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University. John Milloy was actively involved in politics for over 20 years at both the federal and provincial levels. He was a member of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's Senior Staff and later entered elected life as an Ontario Member of Provincial Parliament and Cabinet Minister. He holds a doctorate from the University of Oxford.

tendency to paint the past as rosier than it was, I think that it is legitimate to say that there is a certain unease about the changing nature of political discourse at both Queen's Park and on Parliament Hill. The extreme levels of partisanship, the current Senate expense scandal, the growth of attack ads and the whole idea of the permanent campaign, make it clear that all is not right.

It has become so bad that politics has become one of the few jobs where it is actually thought beneficial to try to distance yourself from the very profession you are working in. To be a good politician, you have to be sure to say: "I am not like the others." "I haven't become captured by those spin doctors and bureaucrats in Ottawa or Queen's Park." "I don't condone what you see in Question Period every day and quite frankly I am just as upset as you are by those attack ads." Could you imagine physicians bragging that they were different from the other doctors? Having them tell you that they hadn't bought into all that medical mumbo jumbo and didn't approve of the way in which many of their colleagues treated the sick.

It is so bad, that jokes about politicians are more often than not told by politicians themselves. "How many politicians does it take to change a light bulb? None. Politicians only promise change." Then there is the story of the two guys talking on a park bench. One turns to the other and says: "My brother ran for Parliament a number of years ago." The other responds: "that's interesting, what does he do now?" And the first one answers: "nothing, he won."

There is nothing wrong with self-deprecating humour. But, as Allison Loat and Michael MacMillan point out in their recent book *Tragedy in the Commons*, companies like Coke and Pepsi who, like politicians, are competing for limited market share, don't attack the soft drink industry in general and are unbelievably restrained when they attack each other. Relying on the work of journalist Andrew Potter, Loat and MacMillan conclude that the reason why this happens is because all involved realize the risks of turning people off the product entirely and hurting sales for everyone, not just their competitors.²

The problem seems clear: disengaged voters, political structures that are stuck in a morass, and a lack of respect for politicians and public service.

But that's not really the problem. We can talk all day about low voter turnout and citizen engagement and even the Duffy Trial, but there are much bigger problems on the horizon. They begin with the fact that we are in the middle of a societal and economic transformation the likes of which we haven't seen since the industrial revolution. And although it has resulted in great benefits for many, overwhelming challenges still exist.

On the economic front, we have a permanent underclass here in Canada. We have unskilled youth, laid off older workers, and persons with disabilities who simply can't find meaningful work. To give just one example, a recent federal government study noted that there are about 795,000 Canadians with disabilities who are able to work but remain unemployed.³ Far too many of our nation's Aboriginal people share in this systematic unemployment, coming from communities characterized by dire housing and living conditions, shocking educational underperformance and serious levels of addiction.

Ours is a world of great wealth but it is unfortunately being held in the hands of fewer and fewer people and it appears that as they get wealthier, poverty levels become more pronounced. A recent report from OXFAM pointed out that the 80 richest people in

the world have as much wealth as the bottom 50% of the population of the entire planet, 3.5 billion people.⁴

Our population is aging and birthrates and immigration are not providing the younger workers needed to support those retiring. Our end of life care system is in a major need of an overhaul and we are about to enter into a national debate about assisted suicide. On the environmental front, climate change is threatening the very existence of our planet and internationally we continue to struggle with conflicts in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and parts of Africa.

I could go on and on, but my point is a simple one. We don't need to reform politics; better engage citizens and make public service more attractive as an end in itself. We need a more effective system of government to tackle these serious issues. We need people in public life, politicians, public servants and outside advocates who can think creatively and effect change. We need the best and the brightest working on these issues directly or creating the needed conditions to allow others in society to find solutions.

So who is going to train and educate and inspire these future public servants? That of course, is the focus of the important work of Laurier's Department of Political Science. I was thrilled to learn about the real world focus of programming at Laurier and the introduction of the Masters of Applied Politics program. By giving students a practical understanding of how government works, the faculty trains them to get the best out of the current system as well as seriously considering its reform.

And that is where I can make a contribution. As a Practitioner in Residence, my role is to give students a flavour of the real world of politics and government based upon 20 years at Queen's Park and on Parliament Hill. I got to see the sausage making up close and can share how I was inspired and encouraged, frustrated and disheartened and, from time to time, shocked and appalled. By sharing these stories and insights with the assistance of many political friends and former colleagues, I hope to help students better understand government and, just as importantly, I hope to strengthen a sense of pride in the choice that students have made in pursuing a career in public service.

It is not just about training better politicians and public servants. To be truly effective, our system needs to ensure that everyone has a seat at the table and a voice that is valued, including religious groups. I am concerned that over time, the voice of Canada's religious communities and the people of faith they represent have been diminished. Religious perspectives on a certain issue often become something to be managed rather than taken seriously. People of faith are often caricatured as self-righteous and intolerant, or to use the vernacular, a group of right wing nuts who are homophobic, inordinately focused on sexuality and reproduction and out of step with the times. Not much to offer!

I disagree. Not only do I reject such stereotypes of the religious as an intolerant rump but I believe that Canada's religious traditions have much to offer in helping governments develop and implement public policy. First, they are an important constituency in terms of size. We can discuss at length the apparent decline of religious belief in Canada but there are still a significant number of Canadians who hold them – a forum research poll, for example, published at the end of 2012 showed 50% of Canadians considered themselves religious.⁵

Many of these individuals are from faith communities with long traditions of making positive and progressive contributions to our public policy debates with a particular focus on justice and fairness. From ending slavery to the promotion of civil rights to defending

the rights of the poor, faith communities have often been at the forefront of progressive social change. The Social Gospel movement, so much a part of Canada's economic, social and political history, was about the recognition in the first half of the last century by many of our nation's Churches and religious leaders of the dangers of unbridled capitalism. They understood the need to address the plight of those negatively affected by the economic transformation that was then taking place in society. This was a time in history that has many parallels to what is occurring today.

Faith communities are not afraid to talk about sacrifice. At the core of so many of our faith traditions is the call to move beyond oneself, of our shared responsibility for each other and our planet. And ironically, it is this notion of sacrifice that is so desperately needed in the political world where the solutions to so many problems involves our taking collective responsibility and action. We may need to pay a little more in taxes or change our attitudes about those less fortunate than ourselves or those wanting to settle in Canada or the need to protect our natural resources and environment. And yet, we have a political class that has expunged the word "sacrifice" from its vocabulary and spends more and more time pandering to voters by telling them that they can have it all with minimal cost and even throw in a tax cut to ensure that more dollars don't go to those "fat cat bureaucrats." In my opinion, when it comes to a government's responsibility to build a more caring and united society it might not hurt if we all "got a little religion."

And finally, religions are not afraid to challenge conventional wisdom. As Rabbi Harold Kushner put it in his 1989 book, *Who Needs God*, even if religion "can't change the facts about the world we live in...it can change the way we see those facts, and that in itself can often make a real difference."⁶ Religion can go a long way to challenge the smugness that has so permeated our political culture when it comes to questions of ethics. It can call us out on our wishy-washy morality that often portrays the role of government as giving all the right to do what they want, as long as they are nice about it.

Yale Law Professor, Stephen L. Carter put it well in his work, *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*:

The fact that not every religious voice will offer the same answers to... pressing dilemmas does not mean that religious voices have nothing to offer. All human beings possess, and most human beings acknowledge, an abiding hunger for transcendence, a yearning for answers – and even for questions – that press beyond the usual limits of our materialistic political thinking. We need conversation not merely about our rights but about what is right... The fact that we hold differing opinions does not mean that none of the opinions are correct. ...when we try to shut the religious voice out of our debates, we close our eyes and ears to radical possibilities that might transform us, did we but listen.⁷

I love Carter's words: a "conversation not merely about our rights, but about what is right." It is amazing how a simple, yet eloquent statement like that, can make everyone a little uncomfortable. What is it all about, our world and our society? What are the specific challenges that need to be addressed and what is the right way to fix them?

And I hope in my new role, as Assistant Professor of Public Ethics to carry on that conversation in the classroom, through research and writing and through the Seminary's Centre for Public Ethics that will promote dialogue, research and education in the field. By

“Public Ethics” we mean those choices we make to serve the common good and the effect those choices have both on society as well as on ourselves. By looking at both secular as well as faith based ethics we can begin to address the question of how we bring our deepest values and highest convictions to the practice of politics.

I want to be clear, in calling for our faith communities to have a serious voice in the public square, I am in no way suggesting that their views be given special status. We need to take them seriously, as we do business, labour, and other representative groups and judge their contribution on its merits. We cannot dismiss it because of its source. I am also not suggesting that religious traditions find a formal role in the political process. As I have tried to argue, religions by their very nature need to be outside the system calling the rest of us out and sometimes being the voice in the wilderness. As theologian David Tracy put it, “religions live by resisting”.⁸ But that does not mean that persons of faith should not be welcomed. More importantly, if they do, they should not be asked to check their faith at the door.

We live in a society where politicians love to speak about what motivates them. They will try to undo each other, for example, in their claims of having grown up in poverty and of how correcting the economic and other injustices they experienced inspired them to enter politics. And yet it all seems to end when it comes to religion as a motivating factor. It seems that they have quickly learned that successful politicians keep whatever religious beliefs they may have to themselves. This is simply wrong. Religious faith shapes our identity. It gives us a perspective on the world and helps define ourselves. It cannot be left behind.

Faith is a source of strength. It’s crazy out there! At Queen’s Park and on Parliament Hill Politicians are pulled in a hundred different directions. They are constantly trying to cope with changing public opinion, the influence of special interest groups, influential business and opinion leaders, financial donors, as well as a media obsessed with process, gossip and gotcha moments. Politicians also live under constant pressure to win, even if compromise is involved. I accept compromise, but when winning starts to usurp everything else, I sometimes start to question whether there is any other purpose to being in politics beyond getting re-elected.

While at Queen’s Park and on Parliament Hill, I sometimes saw a kind of “group think” develop within all political parties. I saw a growing willingness to appeal to public selfishness and our consumer culture. Winning had to come first, which meant some decisions were made based on political expediency rather than well thought out policies. And I saw each side attack the other with a viciousness and at times an unfairness based on the justification that everyone is doing it. I believe that faith can help someone navigate these rocky shoals. It can provide a foundation that helps our elected officials truly assess why they are there, what values underpin their lives and how they can best be applied in complex situations.

But just as politics needs to understand religion, religion also needs to understand politics. Engaging with government and politicians means understanding limitations. Everything can’t be done overnight. It means accepting that you are one voice among many in a pluralistic society. Most of all, it may involve accepting half a loaf or even 10% of a loaf and seeing it as a victory. Finally, for religious leaders, it may mean focusing on your own community first. It is a little rich sometimes, to have church groups call out governments or

politicians when their own congregations don't either support or even understand the position they are taking.

As I tackle both assignments, I realize that I have much to learn but I have already found a welcoming home at both the Seminary and the University.

My decision to leave public life was not an easy one. For a whole variety of reasons, with family at the centre, I realized that it was time. But it did not mean that I lost interest in politics, public policy or the challenges facing our world. The related questions of political reform, public service and the intersection of religion and politics loom large on our national agenda. I am excited about the opportunity to explore these issues, and working with colleagues and students, to contribute to a crucial debate with profound implications for the future.

Endnotes

¹ Samara's Democracy 360: Talk.Act.Lead: A Report Card on How Canadians Communicate, Participate and Lead in Politics (Toronto: Samara Canada, March 25, 2015), Accessed April 5, 2015, http://www.samaracanada.com/docs/default-source/trioro-dropbox/democracy360_story_digital_final.pdf?sfvrsn=2.

² Allison Loat and Michael MacMillan, *Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out About Canada's Failing Democracy* (Toronto: Random House, 2014), 36-37.

³ Employment and Social Development Canada. *Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector: Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*. By Kenneth J. Fredeen (Chair), Gary Birch, Kathy Martin, and Mark Wafer (Ottawa, 2013), Accessed April 5, 2015, http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/disability/consultations/rethinking_disabilities.shtml.

⁴ Deborah Hardoon. *Wealth: Having It All And Wanting More*, Oxfam Issue Briefing (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2015), Accessed April 5, 2015, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/wealth-having-it-all-and-wanting-more>.

⁵ Father Raymond J. De Souza. "Only option for fading churches is to again take up evangelization." *National Post* (Toronto), December 22, 2012, Accessed April 5, 2015, <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/father-raymond-j-de-souza-only-option-for-fading-churches-is-to-again-take-up-evangelization>.

⁶ Harold Kushner. *Who Needs God* (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 27, quoted in Stephen L. Carter. *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 37.

⁷ Stephen L. Carter. *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 108.

⁸ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 83 quoted in Carter, *God's Name in Vain*, 77.