Speech

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Social Cohesion: A Test for the Political Process

Speech to the Queen's School of Policy Studies: Symposium for New Members of Parliament

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Context

Markets today are highly polarizing, creating a society of haves and have nots.

The drive to reduce the public debt has led to significant cuts in the programs which were once the universal foundations for social security – some universal programs have been abolished, others are being restructured. Key insurance programs have been cutback. The "haves" feel less well served by social programming, and they are alienated by stories of fraud and abuse.

As the "have nots" lose hope, they become alienated from society and from mainstream political institutions. More of them begin to live outside the law or outside the basic tenets of society – the homeless, for example.

Polarization undermines democracy as the "haves" are insulated from "have nots" and from any deterioration in social conditions and public services.

80 percent of Canadians say they are really worried about this polarization. [Ekos]

Social cohesion is at risk, and they know it.

Political Values of Canadians

The traditional image of Canadians is: deferential, passive, attracted to order, and acquiescent to elites. Over the past 20 years, that has changed.

In the early 1990s, Neil Nevitte found:

- a sharp decline in confidence in institutions (esp. governments),

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- a belief that government should be more open,
- less deference in politics, in the workplace, <u>and</u> in the family,
- a new work ethic, based on responsibility, achievement, engagement and initiative.

Suzanne Peters' study for CPRN in 1995 surfaced a sustained commitment to:

- compassion *and* self-reliance;
- investment in the future;
- participation in the policy-making process;
- democratic rights and freedoms; and
- an outspoken cry for "efficient" government.

Suzanne's work and many other studies suggest that Canadians' identity is deeply associated with the notion of "we take care of our own." Health care and employment insurance are symbols of this. The way we "take care of our own" is much more than the social safety net.

What is Social Cohesion?

- people have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise;
- they believe they are facing shared challenges; that
- they are members of the same community; and
- they are hopeful.

Why is Social Cohesion Important?

It is essential for a well-functioning society – for the state, the market, and the nonprofit sector.

Governments – Their legitimacy is at stake:

- Are they focused on the well-being of citizens?
- Are they trusted to get the job done?
- Are they making good use of taxpayers' funds?

Corporations – Their economic success depends upon:

- the loyalty, creativity, and problem solving skills of workers: that is, the "collective intelligence of the workforce from the CEO to the janitor";
- the ability of workers to concentrate while they are on the job (and not be distracted by events at home);
- the stability of communities, the quality of education, the access to health and other public services;
- respect for the law, e.g. efficient contracting.

Voluntary or third sector – Its success depends on:

- the trust of citizens and clients, donors (corporate and individual), and the governments which provide funding.

In short, a healthy democracy, a healthy economy, and a healthy voluntary sector are all rooted in the basic civility of society – the trust and reciprocity of a population which has a common identity, a sense of belonging.

The Eight Layers of Civil Society

A sense of belonging and of hope in turn depend, to a considerable extent, on the ways in which people are connected to each other. Figure 1 tries to depict the many layers of connectedness in society**.**

1. Personal resilience

Inner strength: self-confidence; education; ability to learn; social skills.

2. Family resilience

Shared optimism and goals; sense of control, including consistent contact with external friends, relatives or community.

3. Immediate networks

Friends, neighbours, church or ethnic ties. People to turn to for advice, support, venting.

4. The workplace

Social interaction with colleagues; employer investment in training; acquisition of work and social skills.

5. Self-organizing community activities

Choral societies, bridge and reading clubs.

6. Formal charities and non profits

Charities minister to human needs, help clients to cope with adversity. Service clubs and other nonprofits create social networks, give people a sense of their own value.

7. The social safety net and the social union

Sharing of risk of insecurity (EI and SA); sharing the cost of human development (schools and colleges); governments' commitments to citizens to sustain a viable safety net.

8. Democratic institutions

Citizens see an active role for government in society, and they value fairness, freedom, access to judiciary etc. But the decline of deference is reshaping the relationship between citizen and state; citizens are hard to convince that governments know what they are doing; they want into the policy process, somehow.

The health (density) of these connections varies by region, by community, by neighbourhood. Connections are enriched or strengthened by positive experiences with education, volunteering etc. They are damaged/destroyed when a plant closes, when the "haves" withdraw to the suburbs or to gated communities, when governments cut funding for self-help or community organizations.

These Eight Layers Are Not Fixed

- Programs shift from the safety net to charities
- Informal activities often mature into formal charities
- Family, work, church networks often converge into community supports
- Families' needs change over time. (Will child care be done at home or contracted out?)
- Some institutions can function on many levels. Some schools, for example, are completely integrated into the neighbourhood, whereas others are remote impersonal institutions of the safety net.

The Layers Are Interdependent

- Public education, employer training, volunteer experience can all build personal resilience.
- People may be using all or some of the layers at any given time, e.g., a sick child/parent may bring help from family, neighbours, friends, church, the safety net, charities etc.
- People can be needy on one dimension and givers of time and energy on another.
- Needs change over the life-cycle.

Note that much, maybe most, of this social interaction is informal, unmeasured, and possibly unmeasurable. But it is an important underpinning for a well-functioning democracy, for these are activities/relationships which build trust and which enable citizens from different origins to meet each other in a climate of mutual respect.

Some Conditions Which Enhance Democracy

Christopher Lasch (Revolt of the Elites) has identified five conditions which enhance democracy.

1. Common standards of citizenship
2. Equal rights and equal access – especially education/literacy
3. Respect, which is more positive than tolerance
4. Internal constraints which establish standards of personal conduct (This used to come from religion; it is more difficult in a secular society.)
5. Informal meeting places where classes mingle to participate in civic affairs and to debate public issues

These five elements can be reduced to three basics: social policies that meet the needs of all citizens; a climate of respect and tolerance, and citizen engagement – places where people can participate in public debate. David Elton will talk about this.

Conclusion

As a wise politician once said, democracy is far from perfect, but it seems to be better than the alternatives.

The fundamental tension faced by elected representatives is that the political process is highly adversarial. Yet, the fundamental need of democracy to is to foster trust and to ensure that the state is making a positive contribution to social cohesion.

It is important to recognize, as we begin this new Parliament, that social cohesion is at risk.

The primary risks to social cohesion come from the polarizing effects of market forces, and the unavoidable pressure to reduce the public debt. Governments and the political process itself can add considerably to these risks, or they can become a much-needed force for building trust and cohesion in a society that is yearning for a sense of belonging.

Each time you ask yourself, "How will this play in my constituency?" you should test the response against another question: "How will this affect the cohesion of Canadian society? Am I adding the straw that will break the camel's back?"

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