ENSHRINING THE CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS: 'THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENT IN MY POLITICAL LIFE'

LLOYD AXWORTHY

Lloyd Axworthy is the chair of the World Refugee & Migration Council, a group of leaders, innovators and influencers aimed at devising a new, predictable and cooperative refugee system. Axworthy was Canada's minister of foreign affairs from 1996 to 2000 and previously served as federal minister of employment and immigration, minister of labour and minister of transport. He served as a Manitoba MLA (1973–79) and Liberal member of Parliament for Winnipeg (1979–2000). He also served as president and vice-chancellor of the University of Winnipeg from 2004 to 2014. He is considered the chief architect of the United Nations' Responsibility to Protect doctrine and was instrumental in the 1997 adoption of the international Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty.

The following are excerpts from an interview with Lloyd Axworthy conducted by Association for Canadian Studies project coordinator & research assistant Lisa Abramovich.

'I REALLY LEARNED WHAT DISCRIMINATION MEANS'

Well, I'm born and bred in prairie soil and so bring with it all of the benefits of having a big blue sky in the prairies, but also a sense of being far, far away from where the real decisions are being made in Canada, which is to the east of us. I also had the opportunity to grow up in a very highly multicultural community in the north end of Winnipeg, where it the residential living area of a number of Canadians who came from Ukraine and Germany and Poland. And I was in a distinct minority, but coming from a WASP background. So I learned to run fast and talk fast and it's part of my survival.

But it was a terrific experience. I really learned… as a 12 or 14-year old, what discrimination means. I recall one of my close friends coming to school one day and announcing that his name had been changed. And the reason was that he worked for a downtown business operation. And if he wanted a promotion, the Ukrainian-sounding name had to be revised to be more acceptable to WASP ears.

That was a huge embarrassment, and I began to understand a little bit the caste system that was very much part of growing up in the north end in Winnipeg…

'ONE'S FAITH IS REFLECTED BY WHAT ONE DOES ON EARTH'

I also have and I'm still really responsive to a strong upbringing in the United Church of Canada, which at the time in in Winnipeg was still infused with the social gospel idea that one's faith is reflected in what one does on Earth — not what you're doing to prepare for the afterlife… And I eventually did my undergraduate work at United College, which was a liberal arts college, but had been formed by the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalist churches, and they formed the United Church…. It was a very, very active university community because it really did believe in social action. And that was, I think, part of my upbringing. And that was followed by a sojourn in the United States for close to five years.

I did my graduate work in Princeton, but I was in the midst of civil rights movements and Vietnam protests and in fact participated in the March on Montgomery for a couple of friends and some students that I was teaching when I was at Middlebury College, my first teaching job out of Princeton. So I became very much influenced by the notion of people participation and how they how the people become involved in making decisions that that affect them as opposed to the top down.

And I guess my politics became Liberal in the sense that I was a great admirer of Mike (Lester B.) Pearson (prime minister of Canada, 1963–68). He gave a lecture in Winnipeg when I was in my last year of high school that kind of changed my life and talked about what it meant to be a Canadian and how we had a distinct role to play in the world. We were, by our history, used to making accommodations, finding ways of overcoming divisions, and that because we had the privilege of being in a safe place, we're able to do things that many other countries couldn't do. So that was very much part of my, I guess, adoption of becoming part of a Pearsonian Liberal internationalist in my outlook along the way. And that led into my public life…

CHARTER RIGHTS AND CANADIAN IDENTITY

I was elected federally in 1979… And then in 1980, when we came back into power with Mr. (Pierre Elliott) Trudeau, I found myself in the cabinet as Employment and Immigration Minister, which was an incredible experience… Immigration was very much part of the efforts to bring large numbers of Vietnamese, Laotians from the Vietnam Peninsula 60–70,000… And I also the opportunity to experience the most important event in my political life, which was being part of a the government that brought forward the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I still say that whenever asked what was the most important event in my political life, that was certainly it. And the fast forward to the

next question as to why that's important. I read just about a month ago a recent poll done by Environics, and Michael Adams showed that the belief and adherence to the Charter of Rights is by far now the most distinguishing identity that Canadians have... As a foreign minister for close to five years in Canada, and that was certainly the highlight overall, being able to represent some of the ideas I had about how Canada could play a role in the world in a positive, constructive role. And we developed a human security agenda, which meant that we were as much interested in protecting people as we were protecting nation states and boundaries and so on. And that led to the landmine treaty banning landmines. The National Criminal Record protocol, protecting child soldiers, things of that kind that I think gave us a distinguishing position for a period in the world.

REFUGEES AND MIGRANT RIGHTS

And now I act as a chair for the World Refugee and Migration Council, where we do really make an attempt to try to develop pragmatic, practical ways of assisting people. And it's I think in the 4 or 5 years I've been involved, the issue has just become exponentially massive. Numbers, demands the retreat by so many governments towards a kind of restrictive form of of migration, particularly for displaced persons and refugees. So it's an uphill battle, but it's one worth doing so.

... We're one of the most privileged countries in the world in terms of our security and our safety. We have a resource base that has created wealth for us over the years. And as I said earlier, the enactment of certain key elements of government policy like the Charter of Rights and the independence of the judiciary and fair elections... I think that really enabled us to maintain a degree of trust amongst people. And I think that, you know, there aren't many countries like us...

ON RECONCILIATION: 'THERE'S A LOT TO BE DESIRED'

I was talking to a friend of mine the other day who was very active in Indigenous matters and he said, 'Can you believe that in this modern, highly developed, wealthy country with charters of rights and strong efforts about how democratic and diverse we are, that we still countenance that there is 40 to 50 indigenous communities in Canada that don't have drinking water?' I mean, it's just a clear example of how we can put a lot of money into things that we really think is a priority.... There was a big celebration last year here in Manitoba when Shoal Lake — which is the major supplier of fresh water to the city of Winnipeg — actually was given some money by the federal government to start developing its own freshwater program for the community that surrounds the lake. I mean, if you ever want to talk about a horrid... irony about who we are as Canadians. It was that example — that the 700,000 people can enjoy the water of Shoal Lake, but not the people who live around it. And there's multiple examples and I think that (on the issue of) reconciliation, there's a lot to be desired. I don't think that there is a very serious buy-in in terms of what really needs to happen. There isn't the kind of leadership that we need... There's a lot of lip service and we give some money to some places to talk about it, but when it actually comes down to reconciliation, there's not a lot of political leadership in the country going on... And I think it affects us as a country. It certainly hurts our reputation. I think

other countries, while they may regard us positively in many respects, take a look at our own human rights issues in Canada and realize that we've been very negligent, our history has been distorted, and we're not doing an awful lot to correct them.

BALANCING FREEDOM WITH OTHERS' RIGHTS

Several years ago, I spent a summer reading Charles Taylor's book on the secular state. And I thought he made a lot of sense that as we moved away from faith-based... values to secular ones, that there aren't a lot of value commitments. And where they are religious, they become extreme. I mean, the evangelicals did the anti-vax and stuff like that. They hook onto these kinds of notions without recognizing that freedom is not unlimited license. Freedom always has to be (balanced) by how does it affect other people? And I think that our secularism, as (Taylor) said, we have to put into place the affirmation of ordinary life, the right to get up in the morning, to look at the sunset, to have a job, to send your kids to school, and to be free of the kind of intimidation or exploitation — that affirmation of ordinary life. But it's hard to do in a case where the politics are becoming so toxic.

'DIVERSITY IS A GOOD THING'

The Mike Adams study showed that Canadians have basically bought in (to multiculturalism) — we think diversity is a good thing and we are a very diverse country now. I mean, the old Anglo-Franco (idea) — now we're realizing, my goodness, there's been an Indigenous population here for thousands of years and there's a new populations have come to Canada since the Second World War, are now becoming a majority. And I think that's good. And they bring so much more... I value just the level of sort of experience and outlook and ideas and entrepreneurship that was brought. And so I think Canadians generally — they don't necessarily buy the idea of everything is ethnically based — but there certainly is a real respect, I think, for other groups generally. And I think the black movement, the black rights movement is now advancing itself. I think... we still have very strong elements of misogyny in our country, that women are in so many places under real pressure or harassment. I think that's something that, again, we talk a good game — we're not doing much about it.

THINKING ABOUT INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN CANADA

Which of the following do you think represent the biggest challenge when it comes to the reconciliation of differences? Relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous? Relations between Quebec and the rest of Canada? Relations between religious and secular persons? Visible minorities, racialized persons and white persons? Relations between immigrants and non-immigrants?

I'd say I'd say all of the above needs some serious work done. Some more than others. There's one element that is not included in that list, which I think is the is the gender issue. But I think that women women's rights are really under real pressure. And you're seeing it in all kinds of ways... I think I go back to an earlier statement when it comes to relations with Indigenous people. I would give a kind of an F-minus...

We're just not doing what you need to do to solve this...

'A NATIONAL RECKONING'

I think this is a time for another serious reckoning, a national reckoning ... I think that there has to be a real re-evaluation of our federal policies and program, both as we deal with migration overseas or across our borders, but also at our borders. Our settlement programs will be substantially buttressed and rebuilt. I think we have to look at the asylum claim. One of the projects we have at the World Refugee & Migration Council is the connection between climate change and migration. We're going to have large migration inside Canada as communities on the oceans — communities in vulnerable areas — are going to start having to move. And where do they go? Who gets them? We're having this debate.

On the issue of migration and refugees. We follow all kinds of stupid programs like the safe third-party agreements that we know are discriminatory... If you're an asylum claimant, you have a good chance of landing in a provincial jail because we didn't bother to find other alternative housing or people were waiting for their claims to be heard. And four provinces have now broken the agreement with the federal government — to their credit — but we still have Ontario, and Quebec and the federal government using a system in which we incarcerate people who are silent claimants. I mean, what kind of nonsense is that?...

'WE'VE GOT TO UP OUR GAME'

As someone who has been around for a lot of years in public life, I see that over time we've really done some important investment in giving Canadians a way of dealing with identity issues. There's a generational shift away from people saying that hockey and buffalo are part of our identity to talking about human rights and charter rights being so much who we are. Talking to my son and people around him, they don't think in in the kind of wacky terms we're getting in the States about transgender (issues) and stuff. They simply say. People are people. They have rights to the degree that we can support them. But we've we failed terribly with Indigenous people and we're failing terribly with women's rights in this area. I think we've got to up our game.