

Remarks about Peter Russell at Innis College

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When certain professors teach a course — any course — students are well advised to take it and thus to see their thinking and way of working up close. Peter Russell's 2013 course on Canada's origin in incomplete conquests more than justified such a recommendation. Indeed, it was one-of-a-kind in my experience; one of Canada's most knowledgeable and distinguished scholars of politics invited a hybrid group of graduate students and undergraduates to read and critique chapters of his book draft each week. The class admirably demonstrated Professor Russell's virtues: the humility to discuss his work with anybody; his kindness, realism, and good humour; the depth of his knowledge and experience; and his interest in the lived historical experiences of real people, as opposed to abstract or philosophical digressions.

Because he was so kind and gracious, it could be easy to overlook what is radical in Peter Russell's thought. His *Constitutional Odyssey* provocatively asks *if Canadians can become* a sovereign people. He is unflinching about the fundamentally unjust foundation of Canada and other settler colonial states, but only provides guidance toward how to improve the situation, based on his reflection and experience, rather than a neat or complete remedy. Similar thinking is evident in his thought about nuclear weapons. He embraced neither of the doctrinaire views — that nuclear weapons can be straightforwardly abolished, or that these weapons are stabilizing and will eventually proliferate to all advanced states — but argued for dividing power over who can use them and for states to set a moral example for each other through disarmament. His account of globalization includes not only the profound moral inequities of extreme poverty, but also the ways worldwide media can give power to human rights claims — and allow for the dignity and safety of the individual to be preserved despite the ever-present contest for power within and between states.

Professor Russell's thought is radical in other ways, including the apparent willingness to be inconsistent. He repeatedly describes state sovereignty, or at least its Westphalian form, as pernicious. He was a great believer in the power of political parties, democratic legislatures, and diplomacy between diverse interest groups. At the same time, he recognized that the choices of democratic states have contributed for decades to the emergence of our most dire global perils, particularly climate change and nuclear weapons — threats grave enough to make us “lose our earthly home”.

There was an irresolvable point in my discussions with Peter: can people be wise enough to live by democracy, now that we have become the dominant planetary force? I often shared my frustration about how, despite all the evidence on climate change, Canadian voters and politicians are unwilling to take effective action in response. Or they don't even know what effective action would be, having allowed themselves to be transfixed by non-solutions that do not threaten the fossil fuel industry, which has become the enemy of a safe human future. More than once, Professor Russell told me that people like us cannot get elected. He quotes Greta Thunberg about how our leaders are destroying the life prospects of young people, but does not provide a clear and detailed account of the path forward: only that citizens will need to demand better from governments which have so far failed to address existential threats, and that doing so will take global cooperation.

In October, Professor Russell shared another book with me, when he was kind enough to send me the files for his forthcoming memoirs. As someone who only met him late in life, reading them was a marvelous chance to catch up on the story from the beginning. The book is full of humour and sincerity, affection and kindness. It lays out his political philosophy across a timeline, highlighting his conviction that the place and method for resolving complex political disputes and disagreements is in person and through respectful discussion. The book catalogs numerous and varied enterprises where Peter served as envoy or ambassador, *de facto* chair or founder.

Professor Russell and I spoke often about nuclear weapons and climate change as existential threats to the global order. We shared deep concerns about the ongoing global nuclear arms race, and the acute dangers of accidental or unauthorized nuclear weapon use. I hoped, in the last period of his life, that Professor Russell might be able to point to a plausible strategy to keep climate change from destroying the comparatively benign and prosperous global order. I suggested, as urged by Katharine Hayhoe, that there must be a system-preserving case made for abolishing fossil fuels so as to preserve

the things that people of all ideologies value, since the progressive case that climate change provides a welcome opportunity to change everything has little support. He just said that he would keep supporting the Green Party, though we had often talked about the minority appeal of such politics and the indirect and uncertain way it might affect policies and outcomes.

We are entering a wrenching time for global politics. Professor Russell wrote about the philosophical catastrophe experienced by Indigenous peoples when they tried to make sense of their decimation by European diseases. Suddenly, and without apparent justification, these radical changes emerged in the experience of life, calling into question age-old wisdom and mechanisms of problem solving. The whole world is now being propelled toward similar disruption and anguish.

Peter Russell represented a viewpoint that has been much diminished in this post-Cold War era of ‘social science’. He did not see the study of politics as the dispassionate evaluation of empirical data, but instead as rooted in the study of history and ethics. Just as voters will need to re-evaluate their core interests if they are going to reconcile their desires with what the Earth can endure, those of us associated with politics and public policy ought to drop the idea that we are neutral catalogers of the trends and phenomena in an objective ‘world out there’. Rather than being independent of our theorizing, the stories we use to make sense of politics shape and define how our society conceives of political life and how we ought to treat one another. Those stories desperately need revision, and the world desperately needs people like Peter Russell who combine a deep regard for ethics with a rich understanding of history and a focus on life as experienced by individuals. Humanity is in terribly bad trouble, and only a profound reorganization of our politics can preserve open and democratic societies in the face of selfishness, fear, and irrationality as the world which we take for granted changes and vanishes at a pace humans have never experienced. On that perilous road, we have lost a deep-thinking and principled guide.

Though he did not depart the world without hope.

By no means.

He had a faith that consoled and guided him, a vast and loving family, great athleticism and intellectual capacity, great collegiality, and the sort of rich life that only legends sustain.