

Remarks at the funeral of Peter Russell

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1 Long form

I met Peter Russell in 2012 when he taught a hybrid undergraduate and graduate course on his forthcoming book about Canada as a country founded on incomplete conquests. Each week, he sent us a draft chapter as a Word file and we all discussed it. At the same time, I was taking the core Canadian Politics PhD seminar and reading Professor Russell's earlier book about Canada's constitutional history. At the end of a class about the Treaty of Niagara, I mentioned that I had never heard of the 1971 Victoria Charter, a prior effort to put a charter of individual rights in our constitution. Even though we had just been immersed in a completely different time and context, Professor Russell immediately knew all about it, in even more detail than in his constitutional history book. As all our many subsequent conversations would show, his knowledge was indeed vast. Also vast were his kindness and humanity. I never felt like I was dealing with an eminent figure, or a person with any arrogance whatsoever.

When Professor Russell injured his legs in 2017 and ended up in the Bridgepoint hospital for three months, I went to visit and have a talk with him. I ended up suggesting that I could come in weekly, and I did: sometimes only for half an hour, sometimes for three or four hour chats that spanned his vast experience in scholarship and dealing with governments. We talked about political philosophy, the environment, his history with government commissions, the proper role of the security services, Quebec's place in Canada, Canada's place relative to the United States, nuclear weapons, and much more besides.

Professor Russell saw the roots of studying politics in history and ethics, and always maintained a focus on how we ought to live together and what

we can achieve through sound laws and institutions. As a Rhodes Scholar, he studied politics, philosophy, and economics together. He was not a social scientist seeking to confirm or refute hypotheses, but rather a man who drew on history and philosophy to elucidate how we might all live better together. Peter was not an ideologue, but a man who could admire both Gandhi and the monarchy, and believe that several parties working together can make better policy than a majority government implementing its own political programme. We spoke many times about climate change and the paradox of living in a democratic society where the public insist on leaders whose plans are destroying our future, and the tragedy that those who support sufficient action to address the problem cannot get elected.

2 Short form

Peter Russell was a giant:

A giant of kindness

A giant of generosity — with his time, affection, insight, and knowledge

A giant of humour — never hung up on his own suffering, always cheering of others and appreciative of cheer

A giant of humility — a man you could have taken a long intercity bus ride beside and never have learned had such decorations and accomplishments

A giant of honesty — he would tell you straight up when he disagreed with you and why, and was remarkably willing to share himself in his writing and teaching

3 Conclusion

It is proper that we come together to mourn a man like Peter Russell, and proper that we grieve for his loss, for his absence from the rest of our lives. At the same time, the greatest and most meaningful tribute which we can pay to him is to remember the way he made everyone who he spoke to feel heard and important, and to emulate what we most admire about Peter in our own lives, in our relations with one another, and in our communities.