Why We Need Public Intellectuals

The term "public intellectual" in English-speaking Canada at least tends to be a bit dismissive, as though intellectual depth must be inversely related to the ability to communicate. One of the aims of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation is to encourage a more informed public discussion on themes that are important to Canadians. To do this we seek scholars and fellows who are willing, even eager, to share their thinking and to engage citizens on matters of public significance and indeed to provide policy-makers with a wider array of options to consider in addressing societal challenges.

But what, or who, is a "public intellectual"? In a recent book, 2003 Trudeau fellow Janice Stein defines an intellectual as "someone who is passionate about ideas," and a public intellectual as someone who combines this passion with a deep commitment to "an engaged and informed citizenry." [1] Given the discipline-based work of the academy, and the increasingly specialized vocabulary used by researchers and academics—often impenetrable to those outside their own field of work—this commitment to public understanding is no small thing.

1. *The Public Intellectual in Canada,* ed. Nelson Wiseman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

One might posit a continuum of public engagement ranging from those who seek to *interpret* the latest research findings within their particular discipline in layman's language, through those who connect their own field to the larger social, economic, and political context, to those rare people who can speak out credibly on public issues unrelated to their own field or discipline. From within the ranks of past and present Trudeau fellows one can identify examples of each of these; they serve as models too for our community of Trudeau scholars.

Do we need public intellectuals? We face an avalanche of information, most of it devoid of context, a never-ending stream of news and opinion (with the distinction between them often blurred or non-existent). The neo-liberal view that the market is the best arbiter of value leaves little room for intrinsic worth or expertise. Opinion trumps knowledge, and everybody has an opinion, so what could be more democratic? In place of the search for truth we have polls, blogs, "gotcha" journalism and wedge politics. Complex problems get flattened to sound bites or are simply left unaddressed in the public realm.

Knowledge per se carries no special power in a democracy, as Michael Ignatieff pointed out at the 2012 Trudeau Conference, but a healthy democracy needs citizens to be knowledgeable in making choices among competing options. Reliable guides help us to discern what is relevant and credible. Democracy draws its strength from healthy debate of issues that concern citizens. Reliance on elites to make the correct decisions on our behalf is no longer tenable. We want to believe that policy decisions are based on the latest knowledge and evidence, of course, but we also want to participate in arriving at those decisions.

The concerns that mattered most to former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and that remain the focus of the Foundation are of even greater importance today: the health of our ecosystem,

peaceful resolution of conflict, the integrity and dignity of the individual, and the promotion of responsible citizenship. These are not abstract issues; they play out in contemporary debates over the exploitation of our natural resources, our approach to entrenched conflicts in the Middle East and parts of Africa, attitudes toward diversity and the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and the degraded state of our institutions of governance.

The authors of the papers presented in this edition of *The Trudeau Foundation Papers* demonstrate both a passion for ideas and a commitment to engagement. Depth of knowledge is combined with a desire to communicate that knowledge widely and make it relevant to current issues. John McGarry explains why it is important to go beyond the assumptions and narratives that provide a facile explanation of intractable conflict, drawing on his deep experience of Northern Ireland. That experience led him (with his colleague Brendan O'Leary) to provide not only analysis but also concrete recommendations to those who were seeking a lasting resolution of the protracted violence.

In his paper, Daniel Weinstock explores the contribution the philosopher can make to reconciling less violent but nevertheless firmly held divergent opinions on matters that are current and controversial, including the right to medically assisted death, the safety of sex workers, and ways of reducing harm for drug users—all subjects that have been, or are, before the Supreme Court of Canada. He champions the need for empirical research, inter-disciplinarity, and a willingness to engage in the "messiness of compromise" that is essential in the real world of hard choices.

Macartan Humphreys also emphasizes the need for empirical research in examining the *outcomes* of policy and programs, in his case an approach to aid programming that many agencies have adopted in a range of southern countries. Such evidence gathering can be time-consuming, expensive, and methodologically tricky, so

it is important that valuable learning result from it—and that the findings, even if they are discomfiting, are communicated to and understood by stakeholders.

The final two papers address the role of the socially engaged academic. Ronald Rudin explains how people seek to understand the past and how *public history* emerged in the last decades of the 20th century to explore the means by which people reach such understandings. Another aspect of the notion of "public" is his use of a variety of methods to reach a larger audience, including not least by championing *open access* to research findings.

Haideh Moghissi in her paper reminds us that being socially or politically engaged carries its own risks of marginalization. Her forced exile from her homeland led her to re-examine the role secular and liberal intellectuals play in ignoring the threats to values such as gender equality and democracy posed by the forces promising liberation from tyrannical rulers. She finds a similar blindness, or "intellectual astigmatism" in her words, among some Western intellectuals, quick to accept "reasonable accommodation" of religious practices even when they conflict with gender equality. Her paper illustrates another quality of public intellectuals—expressing unpopular views or moving beyond ideas to action takes courage.

Do we need public intellectuals? Yes—not to tell us what to think, but to remind us that thinking is indispensable for responsible citizenship and that complex problems defy simplistic solutions.

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