

Going, going, gone: Dismantling the progressive state ^[1]

Alex's blog

Author: Himelfarb, Alex

Source: Alex's blog

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Apr 2012

AVAILABILITY

Full text online ^[2]

Excerpts:

This budget gives pretty clear signals of a different Canada, perhaps hard to get at because it is not about building but about dismantling: not dismantling the state - witness the expanded use of the coercive criminal law power and the build up of our military and security apparatus - so much as rolling back the progressive state. Some conservative pundits have been continually disappointed in this government for its readiness to spend for its purposes or to intervene in the market when it suits. No, this is more about redefining the purpose of government and undoing, brick by brick, in the slowest of motion, but inexorably, the institutions and programs built over decades following the second world war, by governments of quite different stripes.

...

I have not gone through every page of the budget or subsequent announcements to chronicle every cut to public information but even a partial list tells a story. Gone - the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy. Established by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, this was the only agency devoted to engaging experts and the public on sustainability. Gone - the First Nations Statistical Council. Still relatively new, this agency recognized that aboriginal people are often underrepresented in the census and that systematic information is essential to aboriginal communities to assess needs and what is working and what is not. Gone - the National Welfare Council. For over forty years this agency produced essential information about the poor in Canada, about the working poor, and child poverty and women in poverty. It was the only federal agency of its kind and is and has been an enormously valued source of information not readily available and all too easily ignored. Long gone - the mandatory long form census, several other Statistics Canada surveys and now additional millions in cuts. The United Nations urges all developing countries to establish a national independent statistical office because we have learned how vital credible and publicly available information is to democracy. Not yet gone but under continual assault - the Parliamentary Budget Office created by this government to help Canadians, through their parliament, to hold governments to account for how they spend. Long gone - the Law Reform Commission that no doubt would have provided a trusted independent challenge to the claims behind the government's Omnibus Crime Bill. Going - research essential to food and environmental monitoring, to First Nations and Inuit health, the CBC, and who knows what else.

It should be said that every government has been annoyed by these kinds of agencies. They produce information that allows citizens to take governments to task, to demand more or better. They help citizens to better understand their shared needs, to assess, independently of the latest government spin, what is working and what is not, to participate in solutions. They help citizens to hold their governments to account. No doubt every government has wished, at least from time to time, that one or other of these organizations would just disappear. But independent and credible sources of information, information not available anywhere else, are vital for a strong democracy and so they generally survived.

The Budget also takes aim at another essential ingredient of a strong democracy, the charitable sector. Essential to civil society are the many non-governmental organizations that give voice to people otherwise not heard, including future generations who will inherit the consequences of what we decide. These organizations, which so often challenge and criticize, are never much loved by governments. They always struggle for survival. Decades ago governments decided to stop core funding, to limit funding to the purchase of services, to make it hard for charitable organizations to engage in advocacy. But they survived, even if weaker. This budget and some of the chilling rhetoric around it takes the next step, as environmentalists are treated as a bigger problem than climate change and non-governmental organizations are warned that they better be careful about their advocacy if they want the advantages of charitable status. This and the

cut to the small but effective Court Challenges Program in a previous budget rob our democracy of the dissenting voices that give it strength. Remembering this cut is yet another way to acknowledge the anniversary of the Charter and the essential role it and an independent judiciary continue to play in creating the progressive state.

If there is not much more to a country than the market, individual interests, and local communities, and the territory within which all that takes place, then citizenship and civil society lose much of their meaning. Little wonder that Margaret Thatcher proclaimed that there is no such thing as society. Little wonder that we ask so little of our citizens and provide less and less in return. But this hollowing-out of citizenship and civil society leads to an impoverished democracy in which we vote every once in a while if we so choose and otherwise retreat to our lives as consumers, producers and private citizens. This leads to something of a paradox. With the weakening of civil society, we demand less of our governments and demand that government interfere less. Instead we are on our own and we look to government to protect us and our community and our territory from terrorists and criminals. But with the hollowing-out of civil society it becomes harder to constrain government, to protect civil and human rights when government does act, and so, in the end, government becomes more powerful and less accountable.

Related link: Federal budget March 2012 and responses [3]

Region: Canada [4]

Tags: budget [5]

federal programs [6]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/12/04/going-going-gone-dismantling-progressive-state>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/12/04/going-going-gone-dismantling-progressive-state> [2]

<https://afhimelfarb.wordpress.com/2012/04/17/going-going-gone-dismantling-the-progressive-state/> [3] <http://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/12/03/federal-budget-march-2012-and-responses> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/budget> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>