



A Human Future

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Margaret Atwood is the author of more than 40 books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays. Her newest novel, *The Year of the Flood* (2009) is, in the author's words, the "simultaneous" to her 2003 Giller Prize finalist, *Oryx and Crake*. Other books include *The Blind Assassin*, *Alias Grace*, *The Robber Bride*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Tent*. Her next book, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, will be published in Fall 2011. Margaret Atwood lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson.

Sobering Thoughts: An Interview with Margaret Atwood

This is the second of two issues of *A Human Future* related to our democracy, and timed to come out shortly before and a few weeks after the federal election. For these, we invited two prominent Canadian women—Ursula Franklin and now, Margaret Atwood. Atwood's is a prophetic voice and, like other prophets, she disturbs, but no one can question her love for Canada. L'Arche itself was born of the prophetic vision of Jean Vanier, who spoke and acted to bring justice to people whose marginalization was well entrenched and taken for granted by many in the general populace. — *Beth Porter, ed.*

Beth Porter: What are your thoughts on the recent federal election?

Margaret Atwood: The outcome of the election is a rearrangement of the political landscape in Canada such that Ontario now holds the balance of power in the Conservative party.

The Conservatives got elected because they moved into the centre that used to be occupied by the Liberals. However, Mr. Harper has promises to keep. Will he keep them, and which promises might not be kept? And to whom? So all together it's going to be an interesting balancing act.

People who voted Conservative voted for their pension plan, for their job, for the fact that as long as you know what the rules are you can plan. But the rules—around money for instance, or human rights, are human inventions. What is left out of the rules are chemistry and physics.

Chemistry and physics are not human inventions and you can't do deals with them. The earth is a set size; it is not a balloon and we're not blowing it up to make it bigger and bigger. There is only so much water on it. There's only so much land.

There are only so many biological life forms, including us, that it can accommodate. Unless you start with that, whatever else you say about the future, about money, about

whether governments and nations can respect human rights or not, is not based on anything real. Politicians who talk about the future know this. But nobody wants to

You don't want a government in which the interests of money and the interests of people are deemed to be the same.

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remind people that things are finite. You don't get to have everything. Actually, we can't give you all a 17-room bungalow with a big swimming pool.

What do you see as the main threats to our model of democracy?

I'm working on my dictate-o-meter, and it doesn't actually matter whether a dictatorship calls itself left or right. What matters is how it behaves. So my little arrow, which will be like a clock arrow, has moved over to "We're still in a liberal democracy." If you want to see what "Not a liberal democracy" looks like, you may go to Mao's great famine (there's a book with that title out now), or Stalin during the purges, or Nazi Germany, or Fascist Spain. Those were not liberal democracies. So we're not there yet. We are at the

point where we will be behaving more like the United States in that this government will purge everyone who isn't them from every position that they can. This is what happens in the States when power changes hands.

Typically, we have balanced ourselves with public watchdogs in various areas. The nuclear watchdog was kicked out, the

human rights watchdog had already been gotten rid of and replaced with someone who actually didn't see any cases.

Another alarming thing is that most of the media outlets, being controlled by money of course, favoured somebody who would protect their money—as you would in their place.

But the biggest threat right now is that too much power is concentrated in the PMO. This is a trend that started with Trudeau, and if it goes on too much longer people will say why bother voting. Getting back to representative democracy would be good, and for

Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood has been recipient of many honours and awards. In 2010 she was presented with the Crystal Award by the World Economic Forum at Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, recognizing her as an artist who has made a significant cultural contribution to improving life on Earth. Atwood commented, "The future of the planet will depend on a great deal of human creativity, and it is heartening to see an organization focused on economies recognizing the contributions made by artistic creators and thinkers." She continued: "Language, music and visual art are a part of the human heritage that is much older than economies as we know them today. They are who we are, while money is a neutral tool that enables us to do what we imagine."

that, people are counting on Jack Layton.

Up at the top of my dictate-o-meter is "Screaming anarchy," where you have no government but instead gangs and warlords. So in part, a government is to keep some kind of public order. But what you don't want is a situation in which money and nothing but money runs the government. Because that gives you an oligarchy, and under an oligarchy people without money are powerless. You don't want a government in which the interests of money and the interests of the people are deemed to be the same.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Crake says civilization could be lost in just one generation. Could we lose our democracy in one generation?

You can have a military coup in a day. We can certainly lose democracy in one generation. We made a big step towards this overnight at the time of 9/11. People will roll over very quickly if they feel it's a choice between their safety and an open society. Any people—not just us. And if people are scared enough, they will do all kinds of things that they think they wouldn't ever do.

I don't recommend things. But you can look at things. There are up-sides and down-sides to everything.



I don't know whether you followed the War Measures Act [invoked in October 1970 at the time of the FLQ kidnappings in Quebec.

Nearly 500 people were arrested and held without charge]. We are in the habit of believing those in power. It doesn't matter what people call themselves. Definitions change. It matters what they do.

And do we actually have a democracy right now? If by democracy you mean one citizen one vote, we actually don't have one vote of equal value. The majority of Canadians live in cities. Do you want all those people to have total control of all those people who live in the country? Actually, no. Do you want people in the country to have control over people in the city—more or less what's happening now? You don't particularly want that either.

Are you recommending proportional representation?

I don't recommend things. But you can look at things. There are up-sides and down-sides to everything. As Aunt Lydia remarks in *The Handmaids Tale*, "Better for some always means worse for others." I write about utopias and dystopias because they are models of how people act out their various better and worse scenarios.

You wrote in *Payback* about various forms of debt. What debt do we owe our democracy?

I think that the debt we owe is probably eternal vigi-

lance, which is the price of freedom. But you are up against a pretty sophisticated sin and grin machine.

What changes would you like to see in the electorate?

The most crucial thing is to start teaching Civics in our schools. People don't understand our system, how it works. Young people in public school should be taught this. For adults who didn't get a Civics education, do a comic book. We did a very effective comic book at the time of the free trade debate. If you want to increase consciousness and conversation about political processes you have to do it from the ground up. You need to get to know and understand the perspective of the people who frequent Tim Horton's.

Americans also don't understand their system. The Electoral College was actually put into the American Constitution to keep it from being too democratic back in the 18th century. They were scared of one man one vote. They made it more like a monarchy than they probably realized. Our system started out as more representative, but because of the concentration of power in the PMO it is now more like a monarchy.

Teach how our parliamentary system was set up to

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The role of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO)

In fulfilling his various responsibilities, the Prime Minister is supported by two distinct organizational units: the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Privy Council Office (PCO). The PMO is a staff unit that supports the Prime Minister in his activities as leader of the political party forming the Government. Staff of the PMO are appointed on a partisan basis, and operate in a "politically oriented, yet operationally sensitive fashion." In contrast, PCO is staffed with

non-partisan, career public servants, and functions in an "operationally oriented, yet politically sensitive fashion."

The PMO is headed by the Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, and is primarily concerned with advising him or her on political strategy, priorities and liaison, as well as on the political dimensions of policy initiatives, and other issues under consideration by Ministers. Read more.

—From a current Government of Canada website



be. Then, how it slid away from that—under the Liberals first I have to say, under Pierre Trudeau. If you think I wasn't drawing cartoons about him at the time you are wrong (chuckle).

People always have an odd idea that I am affiliated with one party or another, which I am not.

Things change. People forget. For instance, under Mulroney's Progressive Conservatives, we had the best culture minister that we have ever had. That was Marcel Masse. The traditional Conservatives were more interested in culture than either of the other parties at that time. The NDP were afraid the unions would think culture was sissy. The Liberals were continentalists then. Nationally linked culture gave them the creeps because they didn't want such a thing in Quebec, so they didn't support it in English Canada either.

More recently, the Conservatives decided to go populist but their members didn't respond favourably to their attacks on culture. I notice they didn't mention a thing about culture in this election.

Is there anything you would like to add in closing?

What I would like to add is pretty soon it's not going to be my problem. I am refining the dictate-o-meter. I should have a finished product quite soon. ■

For Your Information

Links

- Margaret Atwood: "My paper napkin guide to the election," *Toronto Star*, April 25, 2011, a reflection on the kind of country she would like to live in and the qualities of a party she would like to vote for. [Click here.](#)
- *Reforming Parliamentary Democracy*, David C. Docherty (editor) and Leslie Seidle (editor) 2003, Tower Books
Read a review of this text book: [Click here.](#)

Resources

- Margaret Atwood's website
- Margaret Atwood's Facebook page (run by her publishers)
- Among numerous causes she supports, Margaret Atwood has a particular commitment to wild bird conservancy. One of the ways she supports this is through lending her name to a brand of bird-friendly coffee. [Click here for more information.](#)

www.larche.ca/en/inspiration

The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

A Human Future is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.

