



A Human Future

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Dr. Ursula M. Franklin, CC, FRSC, is a Canadian academic, pacifist and feminist. She and her family were imprisoned by the Nazis, an experience that informs her commitment to democracy. She received her PhD in experimental physics at the Technical University of Berlin in 1948. She came to Canada in 1949 and began a distinguished scientific career. She was the first woman professor in the University of Toronto's Dept. of Metallurgy and Materials Science. She resides in Toronto and is a grandmother.

Democratic Essentials at Risk: An Interview with Ursula Franklin

We Canadians are rapidly approaching an election about which there is a considerable degree of cynicism, while in the Middle East and Africa, citizens are giving their lives in a struggle to achieve democracy. It seems only right, given this context, that we engage the subject of our faltering democracy in this issue of *A Human Future*. We are honoured that Ursula Franklin, revered Canadian humanitarian, thought leader, and Quaker activist for social justice, has shared her insights with us. — *Beth Porter, ed.*

Beth Porter: What is your vision of a well-functioning Canadian democracy?

Ursula Franklin: The foundation of a functioning democracy is a social contract between those who rule and those who consent to be ruled—a social contract that is inclusive, fair and caring. That means that those who see themselves as governing us are bound by the same principles as those who consent to be governed. It requires reciprocity and equal respect between all parties. It puts these groups on a level of equality. In a well-functioning democracy the social contract is clear, and the reciprocal obligations are understood by all, in terms of honesty, in terms of making a commitment and staying with it. These things are non-negotiable. All contribute and all have obligations to each other, and somebody cannot run rough shod over others just because technically they can do so. Foreclosing access to education, as has been the case for

some First Nations communities, would be an example. There are standards other than power. That is why it's a *social* contract.

Where we now have a great democratic deficit is that while the ordinary citizen is strictly held to many of her or his obligations (down to the last cent in paying taxes, for instance), the same obligations do not seem to be binding for those who govern us. Equally important to the citizen's obligation is that our MPs—those who won the job of representing the community in the decision making of Parliament—do so reciprocally and honestly, and that the venues for them to do are protected.

I have said to those who represent us, “We don't seem to be able to get certain

New communications technologies offer very tempting ways to get around the parliamentary system.

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concerns across to you. And then, it seems some issues can't be raised in the House. You want to do a decent job...What's standing in your way of raising these issues?" This is not a matter of good will or lack thereof. In fact, the same structural problem that prevents MPs from doing their part prevents us ordinary citizens from being effective in influencing government. The structural problem is a short-cutting of our democratic system. New communications technologies offer very tempting ways to get around the parliamentary system. A poll that asks a pseudo question of a limited number of people can be used to push through policy. We see this happening. Or press conferences are used to announce proposals that have not been debated or voted upon in the House. At the same time, party discipline prevents MPs from raising some concerns, and parliamentary processes—hearings, committees—are weakened or skirted around.

Canada has almost no foreign policy but rather is part an elaborate network of trade agreements. Nothing seems to matter but the economy. Now that is not the wish of the people, but it is the consequence of the heavy influence of new technologies and commerce, which put decision making into very different perspectives and time frames. So we deal with the demands of trade, rather than with Canada's relationships to other states. These *relationships* would otherwise occur on very different moral levels. We need clarity as citizens to recognize these problems.

Ursula Franklin on CBC's *The Current*

- **Anna Maria Tremonti:** Don't you think we have enough checks and balances in our democratic system here?
- **Ursula Franklin:** We have them. We don't use them. And one of the big ones is the opposition, both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary...If people elect a representative who happens to be from a party that is not the party in power, that does not mean they are not trustworthy. We don't want a country in which people who may oppose this or that are considered not trustworthy. They make a contribution.

CBC Radio One, *The Current*, May 6, 2010.

Are there core Canadian values that we might not want to consider changing? What values should we hold fast to?

If we understand a social contract as a reciprocal relationship, our values and hopes have to be based on reciprocal caring in the simple sense that we treat others in the way we wish to be treated and that equality is inclusive of all people. That to me is the measure of what is important. Living together means being organized so that tasks that nobody can do alone can be done collectively. You cannot create electricity nor can I, but we can together see that hydro works properly to respond to people's needs.

If our values are anchored in the reciprocity of caring, cultural differences become very secondary considerations. Is it really important whether someone wears a turban? I would think it isn't. But it is



Gordon Gibson—On Democratic Reform—Part I

...Much of what government does is good. But alas, much of what government does is also stupid or wasteful or improperly gives the advantage to one group over others to buy votes... [But] it could be worse—one need only look south of the border.... So we must get past the cynicism, and ask, "How can we make it better?" That should be a central issue of this election—democratic reform.

Condensed from "Democratic reform should be this election's central issue," an op-ed in the *Globe and Mail*, April 13, 2011, p. A21. A further portion of this article may be found lower down in this issue of *A Human Future*.



important that they don't only care for people who dress like them or speak like them or have the same skin colour. One is far more interested not only in what people do but in how they

do it, in conduct. In a civil society, a sense of proportion can steer us away from getting overly excited or overly negligent about differences that may be differences in conduct but may also only be differences in externality.

As citizens, we want to be proud of Canada, but we recognize that apathy and cynicism is sapping energy from our democracy. How can the vision for our democracy be reignited?

The wish to let somebody else do it, to have no responsibility for the community, can be strong, and this is where the danger of fascism arises. Leaving our responsibilities to some strong person who wants to have power can be pretty tempting when the world is so ugly.

Where do we go off the rails? I think when our daily conduct does not reflect reciprocity and caring. For instance, when there is praise for people who take advantage of others. Implicit standards of behaviour are then formed in people and they don't shake off these standards when they get into Parliament. When the daily conduct of those who hold power is nitpicking and uncaring, when helpfulness is not rewarded, and when competition is constantly touted—that

The wish to let somebody else do it ...can be strong, and this is where the danger of fascism arises.

somebody is better than somebody else—what do you expect? People know that if they do nasty things nicely, they are more successful. But civil society does not mean being “civil” in the sense of seeming nice. It means honesty and openness much more than political correctness and good PR.

Thomas Tiekou:

An Inability to Nurture Democracy

A recent Afrobarometer survey shows fewer and fewer Africans support democracy or reject one party rule and presidential dictatorships. The war on terrorism and the inability of governments of newly democratic states to connect with ordinary Africans are behind the new development. I also think the inability of democracy promoters to nurture democracy or promote it among younger Africans is a major part of the problem.



- **Thomas Kwasi Tiekou is a Ghanaian political scientist, the lead researcher of the Africa Initiative at the Centre for International Governance Innovations, and director of the African Studies program at the University of Toronto.**

Afrobarometer is an African-led series of national public attitude surveys on democracy and governance in Africa.

I think that for young people, apathy and cynicism could be combatted if they could experience a little success in influencing how things are done. For this to happen, listening and acting is required on the part of those who hold elected responsibility. You can see how young people are drawn to things that give them community or virtual community, so Facebook and Twitter. They are desperate to be valued as human beings. When they see that their country has no way to recognize their contribution and that they can't change the mind of their elders, why would they not be cynical?

The way we can reignite the vision is through our own practice, but also through holding those who

govern us to standards of fairness, honesty and openness—not trying to micro manage *what* they do but being exceedingly clear about *how* they do it. And then their conduct has to be the best of what the community can expect and not the lowest common denominator.

We have to affirm that from community to community, from country to country, all people matter. When you have honest people who do that, the vision will ignite with power. ■

Stephen Clarkson—Taking their Now-Restored Political Capacities Very Seriously

I am currently teaching an intense workshop in San Juan, a small provincial city near Mendoza in the Argentinian wine country. The university was moved out into the suburbs in the 1970s by the military to remove the possibility of faculty and student participation in the city's political life when they could have threatened the dictatorship's control. The campus has a memorial to those who "disappeared" following the coup d'état.

These people do not take their democracy lightly. Today there are elections in the university, and yesterday the halls were plastered with election posters since not just professors but also students elect representatives who actually run the university and determine its policies.

This is not to say they live in a scholarly nirvana. The

extreme right-wing government of President Menem created a private sector in post-secondary education that has in turn caused a societal split with the middle class sending their offspring to private colleges and leaving the lower-middle class to use the public universities whose quality has fallen drastically.

I infer from all this that, having been deprived of their democratic rights, Argentinians take their now-restored political capacities very seriously indeed even if they have to struggle with poor infrastructure and discouraging pedagogical challenges.



- Stephen Clarkson, CM, FRSC, is one of Canada's preeminent political scientists, a professor of political economy at the University of Toronto who works on regional political economy in the western hemisphere.

Gordon Gibson—On Democratic Reform—Part II

...Without good information there can't be good accountability [and] the shiny tinsel carries the debate. The trouble is, the reforms that would make our political system work better involve a transfer of power. Some would move power from the Prime Minister's Office to Parliament. Some would move power from governments to voters. Unlikely. An iron rule of politics says that no one voluntarily gives up power.... But some great people have voluntarily done so in the past and, more rarely, some great citizens' movements have forced change. We can hope.

The bottom line is this: The gatekeeper to reform is the prime minister of the day. That's the person who can make change—or stop it. If you believe that reforming a dysfunctional system is more important than any of the other issues in play, then the thing to do is look at Stephen Harper and Michael Ignatieff and ask: Which one is the more credible reformer.

Maybe neither, but one thing is certain—if we don't ask, nay demand, things will go on as before and perhaps get worse.

Extracted from "Democratic reform should be this election's central issue," in the *Globe and Mail*, April 13, 2011, p. A21.

- Gordon Gibson has been a significant contributor to informed public discourse for decades. He is a recipient of the Order of British Columbia.

For Your Information

Books

- *The Ursula Franklin Reader: Pacifism as a Map*, Ursula Franklin, (Between the Lines Press, 2006).
- *The Real World of Technology, Ursula Franklin, the 1989 CBC Massey Lectures*, (House of Anansi Press).
- *Dialogue on Democracy*, (Penguin, 2006). A collection of the first six Lafontaine Baldwin lectures.

Links

- Interview with Ursula Franklin on CBC Radio One's *The Current*, May 6, 2010.
- Samara aims to strengthen Canada's democracy and the attention citizens pay to it.
- Report on MP Exit Interviews: "It's My Party: Parliamentary Dysfunction Reconsidered."
- The Historica Dominion Institute seeks to build active and informed citizens.
- Apathy is Boring is a website using art and technology to educate young Canadians about democracy.
- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
- The Voices Coalition
- Citizens for Public Justice
- "Canada's Image Lies in Tatters," (*Guardian* article after Copenhagen, on Canada's approach to the environment)
- Canadian Teachers Institute on Parliamentary Democracy
- The Churchill Society for the Advancement of Parliamentary Democracy
- CBC Radio One's *The Current*, April 20, 2011: "Four Supreme Court Judges are nearing the mandatory age of retirement. Their eventual replacements may be the biggest election issue you've never heard of." Supreme Court judges are appointed by the prime minister. The Court decides major social, political and economic matters. "These judges of the Supreme Court are arguably the most important people in the governance of this country," says Philip Slayton. Listen to this 20-minute program (start: 2:07).

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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.