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Nationalism, Freedom and Social Justice*

When the President of the University invited me to speak this afternoon he very kindly left the choice of a topic to me. When I say that I am going to talk about nationalism, about freedom, and about social justice, he may regret his generous rashness. Even Joseph Howe might have had difficulty with such a vast subject. And my difficulty is compounded by the fact that all these words have different meanings for different people and in different contexts.

Many men have said and are still saying that real freedom is only possible in the national state and that the “right” of nations to self-determination is the most fundamental of all human rights. Our own country Canada, is not a national state but multi-national, multi-cultural and bi-lingual. We can take heart when we remember that the great Lord Acton has said that real freedom is more apt to exist in states made up of minorities whose loyalties are divided between the state and an ethnic, cultural religious or linguistic group.

A Spartan might have been excused had he described the funeral oration of Pericles as nationalistic. It was also about freedom and not only freedom from foreign domination. In considering the correlation between the two concepts, we are on surer ground when we come to the French Revolution. This is usually said to have been the beginning of modern nationalism, of the national state and of the “right” to self-determination. That revolution was also fought in the name of the rights of man, of *liberte, egalite, fraternite*, even although that same great Acton has said that what the revolutionaries really wanted was equality not freedom. The French Revolution also brought the Terror and it brought Napoleon. Later there was German nationalism – there

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wasn't much freedom in that — and the Franco-Prussian War. But freedom did fairly well in the nineteenth century; and, it is worth reminding ourselves, it was helped along by capitalism. Just as we sometimes look back to the nineteenth century as a time of relative international peace, some people look back to that period of classical liberalism with the same nostalgia, forgetting perhaps that real freedom was enjoyed only by privileged minorities.

Behind that façade of civilization new forces were flexing their muscles, not the weakest of them nationalism and the national state which spread over most of Europe and America. Some of the results were good, like the unification of Greece and Italy, but others were bad. Nationalism had in it the dragon seeds of war, and it brought with it new challenges to freedom. It was Slav nationalism that was the immediate, if not ultimate, cause of the First World War. That war set in motion trends and events, including the Russian Revolution and National Socialism in Germany, which were unprecedented in their challenges to freedom. They also destroyed the League of Nations which was the first serious attempt to create a world order based on international cooperation and collective security. These same forces also resulted in the Second World War which was a total war of whole peoples against whole peoples and of opposing ideologies. We have not yet recovered from that traumatic experience. This close relationship between nationalism and war, and between nationalism and the denial of human rights cannot be mere historical coincidence.

I have said enough about the past. I am more interested in the present and in the future. In the third quarter of the twentieth century, nationalism is still the strongest, the most elemental of all political forces. Men and women everywhere still identify themselves first as belonging to nations; and nationalism is still the most persuasive sentiment by which human conduct is motivated. In some parts of the world it has almost completely replaced the more generous sentiments inspired by religion. And it has now spread over the whole world. Like an epidemic, it has spread from Europe and America to Africa and Asia where it is now virulent. There are national movements if not national states in the most remote parts of the globe, and in countries so small as hardly to be viable as well as in super-leviathans bigger and more powerful than anything ever imagined by Thomas Hobbes. Nationalist movements also exist within states, including our own Canada, which

they threaten to tear apart. In the new and so-called developing countries, new nationalisms have rapidly appeared — some of them very strident indeed. On the altar of “nation-building” and quick industrialization other values like fundamental human rights are sacrificed in the name of the collectivity and national aspirations.

Having said all this I think that I should confess that I am something of a nationalist myself. I love my country and resent any foreign interference with matters that are clearly the business of Canadians and of no-one else. It angers me very much when for example, foreign laws prevent Canadians from doing business with the government of Cuba. When I was younger I considered myself very much a nationalist. But I was also an internationalist and, as I understood Canadian nationalism in the period between the two wars, I didn't think that I was being inconsistent. I thought, and others like me thought, that if Canada were to play any role in building a viable international order — which we thought we should be doing — this country would have to have independent status as a member of the international community. Independence was also necessary if we were to remain a united country, and we saw some value in that. If Canada were to survive as a united country and play a positive role in international affairs, we would have to be independent. This meant that, however painful it might be for some of us, the colonial bonds that linked us with Great Britain would have to be broken. We would have to have in Canada the legal apparatus for the amendment of our own constitution, judicial appeals to the Privy Council would have to be abolished and, most important of all, we would have to have the undisputed right to conduct our own foreign affairs, to join international organizations and to enter into treaty relationships with other countries. By the time I returned to Canada in 1966, after an absence of twenty years at the United Nations, most of these objectives had been reached; and if we still have to go to London to amend our constitution the fault is not that of what used to be the imperial country but of our own.

The Canada I returned to in 1966 was a very different country from the one that I had left in 1946. Not only were we a fully independent member of the international community, but there was a new sense of national purpose in the country; I even thought that I could detect a developing national identity. It was only after I had been back in Canada for some time that I began to realize that all this was being

challenged by the growth within the country of smaller nationalisms or provincialisms. I also began to detect manifestations of Canadian nationalism which seemed very like the nationalisms in other countries which, observing them with the cold unemotional objectivity of a foreigner, I hadn't liked and which seemed to be destructive of other more important values. Having achieved political independence, Canadians were, it seemed to me, becoming more self-centered and more parochial in their attitudes towards other countries and other cultures. The distinguished political scientist, Sir Isaiah Berlin, who defines nationalism as "an inflamed condition of national consciousness," has singled out "the rise of acute nationalism in Canada" for special mention. What seems to me to be happening is so intangible that it isn't easy to discuss in concrete terms. I will mention only one example. A minimum Canadian content of radio and television programmes is now fixed by law. This is said to be necessary to protect Canadian listeners and viewers from attacks on their national character and identity from the south. It also — and I sometimes think that this is the operative fact — provides jobs for Canadians. Living next door to a giant as powerful as the United States does create problems. As the Prime Minister of Canada has said, it isn't easy to share your bed with an elephant. But there are dangers along this road at which we would do well to take a hard look. Whatever the reasons for it, legislation like this does impinge on our freedoms. At what point does the fiat of the state in a matter like this become an unwarranted interference with the free flow of ideas and artistic expression and at what point does it become an invitation to mediocrity? There are some signs that we have already reached the second state. And, if we are to control the Canadian content of radio and television, what about books and the theatre, what about the press and magazines? The principle is the same, and one already hears ominous rumblings. In my opinion there is only one criterion that should control the free expression of ideas in Canada and that is the criterion of excellence. Even that should not be imposed by government. I do not consider our national character so weak that we can only protect it by erecting barriers to the free flow of ideas from other countries.

As an international official living and working abroad, I had unique opportunities to observe what was happening in the world, including my own country. I had glimpses of the Canadian scene in a perspective

not possible for most of my compatriots, and I was nearer to what was happening in other countries. An experience like that was bound to affect my thinking about something as antithetical to the purposes of the United Nations as certain kinds of nationalism. But one did not need to be an international official to understand that the chief barrier to the development of an effective world organization was the self-centered attitudes of exclusiveness and intolerance that existed in the member countries. This wasn't as obvious in the early years of the Organization as it later became, at least to me. In those early years we were still reacting to the impact of the Second World War, when the excesses of nationalism and its exploitation by governments for political and economic ends were only too obvious. There was also in that early period a spirit of idealism at the United Nations – not only in the Secretariat but also in certain delegations – which is not as easily perceptible today. As the years went by the war receded into history; its catalytic force became weaker. The international spirit which had presided over the creation of the United Nations was in retreat before the forces of nationalism, and this at a time when, chiefly because of improvements in communications systems, the world was becoming smaller, life in it becoming more complex and difficult and the need for an international approach to the solution of problems therefore more urgent. The plans made with so much hope at San Francisco for the maintenance of international peace and security were thwarted by the Cold War and the polarization of power in bitterly opposed camps. Significant parts of the Charter became unworkable. And if general war was avoided in a world divided by ideologies more incompatible than anything that had ever been known before, including the Wars of Religion, and in which there were now weapons of mass destruction capable of destroying not just a civilization but the possibility of life on this planet, it was for only one reason. Nations had bungled into the balance of nuclear terror under which we still live, a balance which is itself no longer stable.

In my own special work at the United Nations I very soon discovered – after the adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that, while by some miracle and notwithstanding their radically differing political and economic systems, the member states had been able to agree on the definitions of human rights and fundamental freedoms contained in that instrument (which however

they sometimes interpreted differently) they would not easily agree and they have not yet agreed on effective measures for the implementation and enforcement of those rights. I also discovered that the great majority of governments were far more interested in the promotion of certain collective rights, including economic and social rights and the "right" of nations to self-determination, than they were concerned about the promotion of the traditional civil and political rights.

All governments without exception are suspicious of any effort to create international machinery for the protection of human rights, because they are jealous of their sovereignty, will not easily brook any foreign interference in matters which they consider to fall within their domestic jurisdiction and because they will not agree to any fettering of their discretionary powers in their international relations. The experience of the United Nations has been, however, that it is the governments of countries where nationalist sentiment is the strongest that have most energetically opposed the creation of effective international measures for the protection of human rights.

Also significant in any discussion of the impact of nationalism on freedom is the growing conflict between collective and individual rights. Let me say at once that I do not need to be reminded that for most people the possession of civil and political rights can have little meaning unless they also enjoy certain economic and social rights. I was myself responsible for including these rights in the first draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights on an empty stomach don't mean much. But the converse is also true. A country which respects the economic and social rights of its inhabitants but does not respect their civil and political rights is not a free society. The men and women who live in it are not free, however well off they may be materially. Economic and social rights may be a condition of social justice, but civil and political rights are a condition of freedom. The two concepts are not the same, and the purpose of good government should be to maintain a balance between them.

The implementation of most economic and social rights also implies the strengthening of the apparatus of government, and hence the power of the state. This may be necessary, and it may also be necessary to curb the enjoyment of some of the traditional civil rights in the interest of social justice. It was its failure to recognize this necessity that became the Achilles heel of nineteenth-century liberalism. But it is

quite a different thing to say, as it is said in so many countries and by so many governments, that economic and social rights are more important than civil and political rights, and that in any conflict between the two the latter must give way to the former or, worse, that the individual can have no rights against the collectivity in which his personality is submerged. This isn't the first time in history that the primacy of collective over individual rights has been asserted; but the heresy now takes new forms, and is being asserted with new virulence and defended by new arguments.

It is significant that, in the United Nations, this heresy is chiefly defended by the totalitarian and one-party governments which have the most to gain by it, and by the governments in those so-called developing countries that take their key from them and where the spirit of nationalism is particularly strong. It is no mere coincidence that it is in such countries that freedom and the enjoyment of the traditional human rights are most in jeopardy. In many of these countries, moreover, both nationalism and the power of government are fortified by an economic ingredient — totalitarian or quasi totalitarian socialism — which makes them much more formidable, in both their internal and their external manifestations, than the nationalisms and nation states of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When we try to look into the future it is a fact worth noticing that two of the most fiercely nationalistic, and at the same time socialist countries are China and the Soviet Union, and that these are the very countries that have become the models for much of the Third World. This unholy alliance between nationalism and totalitarianism is a continuing threat not only to world peace but also to the preservation of those human rights and fundamental freedoms without which there can be no human dignity.

By all the laws of rhetoric I should have drawn some conclusions. But the subjects on which I have dared to speak are so vast and so full of pitfalls that I will not even attempt to do so. My purpose was simply to point to certain storm signals, to take still another look at that strongest and most elemental force in the affairs of man and of states which we call nationalism, to consider some of its implications for other values, including peace and freedom, and to suggest that even in a country so favoured as Canada (where the cry has usually been that nationalism is not strong enough) we should be weighing our priorities.