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Preserving Our Freedom

IT IS TIME to reassert the principles of our freedom. We need to stop thinking of it as a political condition achieved once, and for ever ours. Freedom can be kept only by vigilance, use and practice.

The long history of the struggle for our freedom, from the freedom of debate in Ottawa's parliament back to the chivalrous impulses of King Canute, is one of fine thoughts translated into deeds by courage and energy. That freedom has been defended through disappointment and reverse by people who were alert to the danger of losing all that had been gained.

Democratic freedom has failed in some countries because their people slept. It is commonplace for people who were fighting against us in recent wars to excuse themselves on two grounds: they didn't realize what was happening to their government, and there was nothing they could do but obey orders. Tyranny degrades both those who exercise it and those who allow it.

Perhaps we have already lost some of our freedom. We may have taken it for granted, thus turning it into a negative thing; we may have been silent in the face of some injustice, thus denying our free men's responsibility; we may have fallen in love with security, which is the opposite of freedom.

These are the beginnings of the loss of freedom, and they come upon a nation secretly. The danger of their coming gives point to the maxim that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. We must restate our belief in every generation if freedom is not to rust away or be stealthily stolen from us or bombed into wreckage.

To say that it can't happen in North America is to talk in a fool's paradise. All we need do is look around the world to see nations that fought for their freedom even more vehemently than we did who have lost it by decay, theft or violence.

What is freedom?

The question: "What is freedom?" is an awkward question because it compels us to think about something we accept so casually that we have no clear conception of it. The issues were clear to those who were fighting for them at risk of life and property. Liberty was not an abstract thing, but something substantial, vital and mind-filling.

"Freedom" is by itself an incomplete term. The questions to ask are: "What are we free from? what are we free to do?" Are we free from persecution and regimentation? Can we apply ourselves in peace and with satisfaction to work so as to gain a decent standard of living according to our ability? Are we free to share equally with others the responsibilities of the human community? Are we free to worship in whatever manner we desire? Have we liberty to think, speak and act as we see fit, within the laws we ourselves have made to preserve human health, safety and justice?

And if we have these liberties, are we developing them? Do we treasure them as things just as essential to us as breathing? It is not enough to make speeches and write articles praising freedom as something good, great and noble. Freedom is more than a poetic word: it is vital to our life as human beings.

We are free together

We need to have a lively sense of the co-operative nature of freedom. It is not enough for any of us to say "I am"; we must also be able to say "I am part of."

Men are easily deceived by a counterfeit sort of liberty, and mistake something for their private inheritance which is only their right as working members of society. Our civilization is so complex that it can exist only if there is a continual compromise between the liberty of the individual and the liberty of society. The beauty of our sort of freedom is that we

remain ourselves even when we join with our neighbours to attain something that is good for all of us.

We have set up a certain balance in democratic countries. Our political liberty is of the kind that curtails certain personal freedoms with our consent so that the wider freedom available to us as members of society may be protected.

We are truly free if we live in an independent state in which we have the right and means to choose, criticize and change our government; in a society where the laws are equal for all people, and the restrictions on our personal freedom are at a minimum; in an economic system which gives us the opportunity to secure a livelihood according to our ability, desire and energy; and in an environment where we are free to display our merit and to express ourselves.

Government is needed

That sort of state cannot be built on anarchy. It needs government, and democratic government is the hardest sort of government. It is not merely majority rule. In addition, it must recognize the right of every group to be heard, to present its case, and to receive thoughtful attention. The duty to listen is an important ingredient in our system of freedom.

But having set up a democratic government does not mean that we can shuffle off further responsibility. The government is nothing more than a group of persons selected to manage the country's affairs. Like shareholders in any business, we need to exercise control over those to whom we delegate management jobs.

What we have in democracy today is government of the people by themselves, through which they try to settle everything for the greatest good of the greatest number by the common sense of the majority after the consultation of all.

Government by the majority may be unpleasant, oppressive and frustrating, but it can never be unendurable so long as every member of a minority has the free opportunity to convert the majority by changing their views.

Responsible government in a democracy lives always in the shadow of coming defeat, and this makes it eager to satisfy those it serves and in whose hands its destiny lies. Here, once again, we find the demand for active use of personal freedom: those who refuse to take part in the government, directly or through the franchise, may be punished by living under a government of worse men than themselves.

What tyranny offers

Let us set over against this notion of free government just what it is that a tyrannical government offers. We acquire only dim ideas about totalitarianism, fascism, communism, statism and all the other opposed sorts of government, if we banish them from our minds because they are unpleasant to think about.

Knowledge of what tyranny stands for and what its effects are on the lives and spirits of people should put some honest detestation into a free man's fight against it.

Statism — the form of government that makes the state supreme and the person only a tool — rarely presents itself to the people of a country as a policy they may choose from among others. It is a growth that attaches itself to the political body by encroachment. A demagogue or a party leader appears on the hustings with promises to cure all ills. He appeals to fear, greed or hate. He pledges easy security along whatever line the crowd wants at the moment. He moves from stage to stage with subtlety, until the people find that they are denied the right of criticism, freedom of action, freedom of thought, and the right of appeal either through the franchise or through independent courts of law. Legislative and judicial power are in the hands of the dictator.

The choice then is between conformity and martyrdom: no room is left for freedom. As the German law of July 14, 1933, told the story in fifteen words: "The only political party in Germany is to be the National Socialist German Workers' Party."

Lenin set forth the communist view: "Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed? Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticized?"

There are people who declare that if many things would be worse in Canada under an intelligent dictator, some things would be managed better. As was said of the people who were refused liberty by a Greek tyrant: though their chains weighed heavier, yet they were now smoother and better polished than formerly.

Dictators have found it expedient in most countries they command today to keep or to set up some democratic forms, but the result is nothing better than a caricature of democracy. Lip allegiance is given to principles, but there is no heart or honesty in their horribly wrong and cruel and mind-destroying form of government.

What has all this to do with Canadians? Not to frighten them with ghosts but to warn them that even here, at the other side of the world and with seven hundred and fifty years of Magna Carta as a bulwark, they must be on guard.

It is not an easy business to protect the freedom of the individual in a society that demands for preservation of its very life the existence within its government of large measures of power, organization, and authority.

People in public office can come to think that they serve the interests of the people they represent if, behind the traditional forms and pageantry they quietly manage the substance of the country's business. Governments have a way of demanding from their legislative bodies all the powers that they think they can get conceded to them.

The only safeguard of the substance of freedom is an informed, educated, sound and vigilant public opinion. Freedom will not be kept if we elect officials to represent us and then become politically dormant. Direct concern of voters with the good of the country expressed in positive words and actions will confine government to its only justifiable role: that of protector of the rights and freedom of the individual. The more of our personal burden we encourage our government to assume, the closer we bring the day when the rulers will be stronger than the ruled, and self-government will disappear.

Charters of freedom

This freedom of ours began humbly, grew slowly and was fostered with patience, endurance and courage. It is surely worth effort on our part to understand it, to preserve it and to improve it.

One lesson we learn from expressions of freedom through the centuries is this: it isn't good enough to be against something because we don't like it: we need to uphold positive values because we believe in them.

This is evident in the law of King Canute, which, though not a charter, was one of the first expressions of freedom under impartial law. In 1027 he commanded his counsellors "that henceforth they neither commit themselves, nor suffer to prevail, any sort of injustice either from fear of me or from favour to any powerful person." He ordered his magistrates to administer the law equally to all persons whether high or low, rich or poor.

A hundred years later there came the first effort to limit the power of kings by legal statute openly arrived at and openly proclaimed, and we are indebted for it to a woman. She was the English Princess Edytha, daughter of King Malcolm of Scotland, whose name was changed to Matilda in honour of the King's mother, and who came to be called by her people "Good Queen Mold". Before she consented to marry Henry I, she compelled him to sign a charter guaranteeing the rights of individuals and a return to constitutional rule. This was distributed, with copies of the laws of Alfred the Great and Edward the Confessor, to a hundred places of safe keeping.

These three, the charters of Alfred, Edward and Henry, were the source material of Magna Carta, the Great Charter of Liberties, under which, in the words of Lord Macaulay, "commences the history of the English nation." A new national feeling had asserted itself as Saxons and Normans intermingled after the conquest. The climax came in the reign of John, whose reckless taxation brought about an uprising led by the barons with the Archbishop of Canterbury at their head.

The Great Charter which John was forced to sign at Runnymede contained few provisions that were new, but it brought together the most important rights that had been enjoyed by English free men, and it guaranteed them. It is not its details that give the Great Charter lasting importance, but its underlying principle is important for all time: that government should be conducted according to the law.

The list of civil liberties was extended by the Petition of Rights, forced upon Charles I by parliament in 1628. A third great instrument in the history of civil liberties grew out of the revolution sixty years later which resulted in the deposition of King James and the calling to the throne of William and Mary. It was embodied in the Bill of Rights of 1689, by which, although the monarch remained formally head of the state, the controlling authority was vested in parliament.

Freedom crosses the Atlantic

Love of freedom and recognition of individual human value were two of the outstanding qualities which the Englishman took with him to the new world.

England was the only great colonizing power that had representative government at home. It was taken for granted that when English people settled in a colony they would establish representative government. The earliest example was in Virginia, where in July 1619 there met at Jamestown the first assembly in any English colony. In 1620, Bermuda set up its legislature, and in that same year there occurred one of the dramatic episodes in the history of free government. A handful of Puritan refugees, seeking a place on unknown shores where they could live according to their beliefs, free and unmolested, drew up an agreement rightly regarded as one of the most remarkable documents of modern history. Those people on the *Mayflower* started their Compact: "In the name of God," and continued: "We . . . solemnly and mutually . . . covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic."

Echoes of Magna Carta may be heard in the early constitutions of Virginia and Massachusetts and in the United States Bill of Rights.

More recently, the same echo is picked up in the North Atlantic Treaty, signed by nations "determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."

Freedom in Canada

We enjoy many freedoms in Canada, some won in olden times and others established within memory of

persons still living. We have freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of association in trade unions, professional societies, and so forth, all subject to the law of the land, and we have all the personal freedoms based upon Magna Carta.

Nor have we liberty only as a nation, but in the larger area of world affairs. The Commonwealth does not stand for standardization or denationalization, but for the fuller, richer and more various life of all the nations comprised in it.

A committee at the Imperial Conference of 1926 described Commonwealth nations as "autonomous communities, equal in status . . . united by a common allegiance to the Crown." It went on to say that free institutions are the Commonwealth's life-blood and free co-operation its instrument, with peace, security and progress among its objects. The Statute of Westminister, five years later, set all this forth in a legislative way.

Freedom here and now

We are compelled in the present state of the world to look upon our freedoms in a hard-headed way. We must stop gazing backward with a sort of home-sickness at the dim past. It is futile to indulge in speculation about a back-to-nature movement, a return to a state of innocence such as existed before the apple incident in the Garden of Eden. But neither are we selling choice lots in the suburbs of Utopia, to be occupied in some future time.

For those who dearly desire a Utopia, Voltaire summed up the needed action in the final injunction of Candide: "Let's cultivate our garden." We don't need to wait until millions of people have deliberated upon our idea of freedom and legislated it. We have our freedom here and now, to use effectively and wisely, and to cherish and protect.

Let us not mince words: the descent is easy from any height to which men have attained. Once started on the road that leads to an authoritarian form of government the course of events can be read in history. The living spark of democracy, the freedom of the individual human soul, is stamped out. As Sir William Wallace said so well: "No country is wretched until, by a dastardly acquiescence, it consents to its own slavery."

One way to guard our freedom and to extend freedom is by education for freedom. The dictators teach tyranny. They impose beliefs and they demand obedience to a creed which rouses the baser nature of men. They make robots of their people whereas democracy offers open-eyed responsibility. It is the difference between the slave mind and the free mind.

There are Cassandras in every democratic state, prophets of calamity, who tell us that the crisis is upon us and there is nothing to do but crawl under the bed and await the outcome. But human existence and the continuance of freedom depend upon, first, seeking peace, and then, if that fails, self-defense. As Pericles told the Athenians at a time when morale was low: "Remember that prosperity can only be for the free; that freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it."

No safeguard is automatic. To maintain freedom requires a hardness and stamina that presuppose a strong desire and determination. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote of "freedom leaning on her spear." It is well to let the underworld know that freedom has a spear.

We may be tempted, in the enjoyment of life as we live it under democracy, to say to ourselves: "We can win, if not in the short run, then in the long run." But when the opposing forces are so strong as they are now, and can be so suddenly launched, there will be no long run for those who are unprepared.

Stronger than we think

Our position as democracies is stronger than we think, not because of our high standard of living or our scientific progress, but because freedom is so deeply rooted in our spirits and our minds. If we bear witness unceasingly to our delight in living as we do, to our enjoyment of religious liberty, political liberty and the civil liberties — personal freedom, freedom of communication, and freedom of assembly — then we shall not be caught unawares by the deceitful penetration of tyranny.

Freedom is an ever-broadening thing. It is not yet perfect, but by giving thought to it we can work at making it come closer to our ideals. And we can dream, which is one of the privileges of freedom, about what will be.

Most of us know James Hilton's book *Lost Horizon*, or the moving picture made from it. There are romantics among us, people who wish that Conway, the hero of the story, had stayed in Shangri-La as successor to the High Lama. Then there would be a shadowy kingdom of freedom in the Valley of the Blue Moon, a place of peace and culture. It might be unattainable, but it would be there, beyond the mountains, to reach toward and to be sure about.

The sort of freedom that we in the democratic countries hope for, spread all over the world, embracing every person, may seem far away, but it is the only possible beacon upon the uncharted seas of the future. That freedom, in which our national and personal freedoms are bound up, is a precious thing, worth striving toward.

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