

Does Canada Matter?
Liberalism and the Illusion of Sovereignty

Clarence Bolt

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CLARENCE BOLT IS CONVINCED that neo-liberalism poses a major threat to Canadian sovereignty and the different historical and cultural traditions of regional and linguistic communities. He hopes that, by exposing the problems associated with homogenous globalism and the tendency of elites to push a liberal agenda, it will be possible to create an opportunity to inform other Canadians who are equally frustrated and cynical about current political realities but who are uncertain about what the problems are or what can be done to change things. Bolt's thesis is that the biggest problem facing Canada is liberalism and the various corporate, political, academic, and media elites who have dominated and managed policy debates and the public agenda according to liberal assumptions. In an effort to mobilize and inform the general public about the dangers of current political thinking, Bolt argues that Canada's economic, social, and political problems can be resolved, but only if we first understand the threat to our sovereignty posed by neo-liberalism and then spend some time creating models that are better equipped for dealing with contemporary problems and challenges. The objective of the book is provocative: to question the policy prescriptions of neo-liberal elites. In an effort to transform the intellectual and political environment, the author

begins by pointing out various problems associated with the liberal approach to interpreting social and political reality, and he concludes by offering a new, more community-based approach. It is a vision calling for grassroots democracy and stronger regions.

The analysis begins with a brief discussion of the threat posed by liberalism and a group of elites who have made it possible for liberal ideas and policies to flourish and shape our perceptions of globalization and our conceptions of citizenship and national identity. This is followed by a discussion of the various economic and political problems associated with liberal ideological traditions in Canada. The author argues that the country can remain sovereign and united even in an era of globalization only if new forms of democracy emerge and citizens mobilize and challenge the liberal assumptions and policies imposed by their elites.

Bolt addresses an important contemporary issue, but there are a few problems with his analysis. One problem with the book is the way the material is organized. A related problem involves the sources that are used to support his argument. In an effort to present an informed discussion, the author borrows widely from a diverse group of people who do not always seem relevant to the analysis. Bolt discusses the ideas of George Grant, T.W. Acheson, Alan

Cairns, Linda McQuaig, Cole Harris, Michael Polanyi, Charles Taylor, and Harold Innis, among others, to support his claims. Greater emphasis should have been placed on integrating this material in a more systematic way. For example, it would have been useful had the author gone further in establishing the link between Grant's views on liberal thought in Canada, which receives a great deal of attention in the first part of the analysis, and the regional model that is defended later on.

Morover, the book does not include various sources clearly relevant to the issues raised in the analysis. Given the content of the book and Bolt's observations and policy prescriptions, the author should not have ignored the work of people like John Porter, Louis Hartz, Kenneth McRae, Seymour Martin Lipset, David Bell, Neil Nevitte, Janet Ajzenstat, and Peter Smith, among others, who have debated and discussed Canada's formative influences, traditions of elite accommodation, and cultural traditions. Furthermore, since Canada is not the only country in the world concerned about the forces of globalization, the "democratic deficit," or the need to re-think the role of the national state and shift power and authority to a local and/or regional level, it would have been beneficial to place this debate in a comparative context. Bolt's analysis would have been better informed had it even briefly mentioned the struggle over regions in Europe and the extent to which these kinds of experiments have, in practice, helped to strengthen democracy and to promote the cause of European integration and unity.

Regionalism comes in various forms, and a frustrating feature of the book is its lack of detail concerning the best way to implement a new regional vision. What would the regional boundaries

be and how would they be determined? On a couple of occasions Bolt refers to Newfoundland and Labrador as part of the Maritimes. However, the Maritime region does *not* include Newfoundland, and Atlantic integration has been a holy grail for generations. Nor are other important issues addressed. How would this regional vision deal with the Native question? Would there be equalization or would each region have to be self-supporting? These and other relevant questions are ignored. Indeed, Bolt is better at identifying enemies than he is at providing details on how to create and implement a new vision for the future.

A final problem I had with Bolt's analysis involves his assessment of the Rowell Sirois Commission. According to Bolt, who appears to support the study, the federal government "paid little attention to the findings of the Commission" because "such an approach smacked of socialism" (57). The Rowell Sirois Commission was informed by Keynesian assumptions, and Ottawa did implement several policies based on its recommendations. It is also worth noting that the Rowell Sirois Commission study was opposed by Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia because Ottawa assembled a group of academic elites who tended to be centralist and then tried to impose this new vision on the provinces. The integrationist vision promoted by the commissioned study was opposed by these provinces because it was seen as elitist and as a threat to provincial autonomy. Given the argument defended by Bolt, it would have been useful to spend more time on these apparent contradictions.

To conclude, while this book raises some interesting issues, it will make only a slim contribution to the debate over political restructuring in Canada.