

Speech delivered for

**"The Future of Canadian Democracy:
Lessons from the Royal Commissions"**

An address by

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Good afternoon to you all--and I thank you for that most generous introduction. This annual lecture is in recognition of Florence Bird, a woman of remarkable intelligence, generosity and achievement. Florence Bird made a unique and important contribution to Canadian life, and to the lives of Canadian women. So it is a high honour for me to be with you today, and to express again my own respect and affection for Florence Bird.

Indeed, I think this is a timely opportunity to reflect on one of her most enduring accomplishments--the work and report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. It is now some 31 years since that Royal Commission produced its final report and recommendations, a full generation ago. Yet the findings of the Commission--the injustices it recorded, the reforms it recommended, the values it affirmed--remain as compelling and relevant as ever. It is well to consider again what the Royal Commission on the Status of Women achieved, and to understand the urgent work still to be done.

More than that, I want to argue that there are necessary and valuable lessons to be drawn from this and other Canadian royal commissions. Lessons for improving our democracy. For engaging Canadians more knowledgeably--and more powerfully--in the public policy decisions that govern our lives. Lessons for designing and applying research in the service of a more open and democratic government. In short, I will invite you to think of how royal commissions--a venerable institution of Canadian history--can inform and energize a new generation of democratic action and political decision.

It has to be said, and I concede, that royal commissions have not been much used in recent years, with the notable exception of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Affairs. There is something dusty and a little quaint about the very expression "royal commission"--an old-fashioned phrase lately more familiar to

archivists than activists. Still, I'm convinced that royal commissions present us with a model for a better way of governance. And there is no more instructive example to prove the point than the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

For that reason alone, it is worth analyzing why Florence Bird and those six other commissioners succeeded as well as they did. At least three key factors stand out: timing, leadership, and citizen involvement.

First, timing. Prime Minister Pearson established the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in February 1967. The Commission opened its public hearings in April 1968, the same month that Pierre Trudeau became Liberal leader and prime minister. These were extraordinary times for Canadians--the season of Expo 67 and Centennial celebrations, a moment when all things seemed possible. More specifically, it was a time of high and rising public awareness of the rightness--and even the obligation--of citizen participation in public affairs. There was a shared sense of government as the legitimate balancer of contending social interests. A belief in government as an instrument of change. And an acceptance of NGOs as authentic expressions of citizen thinking and sentiment. All of which is to say that the timing was right for citizen engagement, for fresh analysis of important questions of social justice and public policy, for the recommendation and execution of real reform.

The second factor of success? Leadership. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women enjoyed the immense advantage of having as its chair Florence Bird. She was a person of energetic intellect, easy charm, and diplomatic skill. And she pursued her objectives with conviction and determination, lightened by a patient and graceful wit. Florence was already a celebrity (an asset she deployed knowingly, to attract public and governmental attention to the commission's work); and she was a friend of Prime Minister Pearson, which couldn't hurt either. Born into the upper middle class of Philadelphia, she had been educated at Bryn Mawr--one of those schools founded for just such fortunate bright young women. By 1967, she was a famous journalist and broadcaster in Canada, working under her *nom de plume* (or *nom de guerre*, as it may have felt from time to time) Anne Francis. In her day, she was one of the few women's voices heard on the CBC.

From the start, these qualities had a special significance for the Royal Commission. Florence understood the importance of arousing media interest in the commission's work--and she knew how to get it. She not only tolerated reporters and cameras in the hearings, she sought them out, invited them in. It was part of her strategy--to awaken and educate the interest of Canadians. As the chair herself later acknowledged, some of her fellow commissioners were at first not happy with the obtrusive presence of TV crews and microphones. This was not, in the main, how things were done. But the doubters finally relented, persuaded that wide coverage of the hearings would both influence the public and influence the government to favour the Commission's recommendations. In the end, they were right: Media coverage served to arouse public involvement, and to prepare the Trudeau cabinet for consequent policy changes.

The third condition for the Commission's success was exactly that--citizen engagement in the inquiry itself. This was not quite the first royal commission to engage citizens in public hearings with heavy media coverage. (The Carter commission on taxation and the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and

Biculturalism had both elicited lively public and media interest.) But no royal commission before this had so consciously made active public participation so accessible, or so central to its process. Nor had public hearings ever had so much effect on a commission's final report. As the chair later emphasized, those public hearings didn't just give voice to public opinion. They gave direction to the commission's groundbreaking research. They "showed us where more research was needed," she wrote more than 20 years later, "to find out where Canadian society seemed to be going." It was this interaction of public representation and professional research that endowed the Commission with its value--and constitutes a model for our future.

The public participation was authentic, not staged. The commissioners took pains to hear from women themselves, and not just from the usual associations and institutions, governments and businesses. The commission prepared a pamphlet on how to write a brief, and distributed it in libraries and supermarkets. In time, the public hearings took up 33 days--mornings, afternoons and evenings, mostly in church halls, schools and shopping malls. Some 468 formal briefs were received, along with hundreds of letters.

To give you a stronger sense of that experience--and a feel for the times--let me show you a short video of the Commission in action. And if it all looks quite dated, that in itself is a tribute to what the commission helped to accomplish. Its work and recommendations, in significant degree, helped get us to where we are now from where we were then. Let's watch . . . [Run tape]

As I say, some of those images do seem almost antique, and a little naive. But don't be misled by the apparent innocence of it all; the Mounties sure weren't fooled. In 1993, more than 20 years after the Royal Commission reported and disbanded, it was officially revealed that the RCMP Security Service--predecessor to CSIS--had closely monitored the Commission's hearings and correspondence, accumulating a 269-page secret file. The RCMP seems to have imagined that the Royal Commission was vulnerable to sinister subversives like the Voice of Women, or the Quebec Women's League.

Subversive or not, what actually did the Royal Commission accomplish? And why, in 2001, does it still matter?

Start with the Commission's report, in 1970. It contained 167 separate recommendations, addressing with detail and insight the economic, social, political and family life of Canadian girls and women. It looked at tax policy and education, inequalities in the Indian Act, health care and reproductive rights, child care and criminal law. It named the injustices faced by women, as witnessed and testified by women themselves. And it directed governments clearly and explicitly to practical remedies.

A striking percentage of those recommendations--80 per cent perhaps, depending on how you count--have since been implemented, in whole or in part, by federal and provincial governments. Big recommendations remain unfulfilled--creation of a national child-care program, for one. Even so, it is undeniable that the Royal Commission had specific, measurable effects on women's lives because of the recommendations it made. Recommendations whose authority grew out of its open, deliberative process of public hearings and innovative research.

But this Royal Commission had more profound and far-reaching effects than just the advice of its recommendations. Let me propose three.

First, the entire experience of the Commission--its wide mandate, its hearings, its research and its report--had the effect of engaging women as never before in Canadian public and political life. We became engaged in understanding and reformulating the realities, difficulties and opportunities of our personal lives in the context of the economic, social and political environment. There was a new and lasting recognition, in one of the catchphrases of those days, that "the personal is political."

And Canadian political life has been altered as a result. To cite one case: It is almost unimaginable now, but it was not until 1972 that Quebecers elected their first woman to the House of Commons. That was Monique Bégin, who had been executive director of the Royal Commission's staff, and went on to a distinguished career as a minister in successive Trudeau cabinets.

The second great effect of the Commission was to place the "status of women" permanently on the political and public policy agenda. It is now (but wasn't then) a conventional step in the formation or analysis of any public policy to ask how it affects women in their own circumstances. Consideration of the status of women is formally established in the machinery of government, and informally established in the political discourse. Obviously, that is not to say that all the inequities and special challenges that women confront have been addressed and resolved; they have not. It is only to say--but this is saying quite a lot--that the rights and activities of women are now an expected and normal subject of public policy.

The third lasting effect of the Royal Commission I would mention here is the new research it stimulated--and the new ways of thinking--about how Canadian women actually live and want to live, and how they make their livings. The Commission itself ordered up some 40 different studies for its own purposes--research that explored the realities of women's lives by asking questions that had never been asked before. About education and health. About Aboriginal women. About employment and pay equity. About the economics of children and families, for that first generation of women with access to birth control pills. (First legal access was only in 1969!) This discovery of new knowledge began to educate citizens and governments about the real issues at stake, and about some of the hard choices to be made. This is a fine example of a phenomenon described by my friend and mentor Bruce McFarlane: pioneering social science research becoming part of society's conventional wisdom and popular speech--through the vehicle of a royal commission.

In summary, this Royal Commission (like some others) demonstrated the rich democratic potential of citizen participation, deliberation, and directed research. My point is simply that there is a model here for improving the ways that Canadians think about, talk about, and set about making the public decisions that govern our lives.

If powerful public institutions seem too remote; if so much public argument sounds irrelevant and unproductive; if Parliament and the legislatures seem so often ineffectual against the powerful pressures of globalization--if democratic government itself seems elusive or threatened, then we need to re-examine

how we govern ourselves. Royal commissions are a good place to begin that re-examination.

As we know, governments of the past 20 years have resorted to royal commissions less frequently than in earlier decades. But the influence of recent royal commissions has been significant nonetheless. Recall the Macdonald commission--formally, the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada. Its work, and its 1985 report recommending free trade with the United States, radically changed the dynamics of a policy issue that had divided Canadians for more than a century. By its impact on the government of the day, and on the public discourse, it quite literally altered the course of Canadian history. An earlier royal commission, chaired by Chief Justice Emmett Hall and created in 1961, produced a report that served as blueprint for the medicare system we still have today. And the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, chaired by Madame Justice Rosalie Abella, laid the foundation for employment equity legislation across the country and, indeed, beyond (for example, Northern Ireland). Less dramatically but still significantly, royal commissions on reproductive technology and on the conditions of Aboriginal peoples have affected politics and policies in important and lasting ways.

In fact, there have been several hundred royal commissions in Canada since Confederation--some more memorable than others. (Florence Bird had to share offices for the first six months of her mandate with Professor Clarence Barber's one-man Royal Commission on Farm Machinery.) Prime ministers have appointed royal commissions with the usual mix of governmental motives: to compile information for policy makers; to activate and inform public opinion; to gauge reactions of interest groups to possible policy changes; to investigate some episode of misgovernment; or sometimes to mediate between rival economic or regional interests. More than once, admittedly, royal commissions were created only to allow a cabinet to procrastinate, or insulate itself from a scandal, or shift responsibility for a risky or unpopular policy decision.

Notwithstanding the occasional abuse, the good use of royal commissions proves their value--and their potential, I believe, for improving our democracy.

It is clear to me that one of the critical requirements of good governance--and I mean good governance anywhere in the world--is the interaction of genuine citizen participation with the discovery and creation of new knowledge. In a phrase, representation and research. Through participation and research, citizens learn. Decisions are improved. And the actions of governments carry a stronger and more just legitimacy.

This is where my own organization--the International Development Research Centre--is investing more of its own resources: in marrying good governance practices with research that serves the needs of people in developing countries. We focus on the convergence of democratic development and strategies of economic and social policy that benefit the poor foremost.

Canadians face these same challenges: how to engage citizens in the hard choices of public policy, to identify and consider new and alternative courses of action. That means creating new procedures for people to speak their minds--and to hear, carefully, the voices of others. And it means organizing research that can inform the policy choices we make, to make them fairer and more effective.

There is a sense now that the complex interplay of bureaucracies, parliamentary committees, and lobbyists (including the NGO lobbies) is somehow failing us. Failing to give citizens sufficient time or chance to speak, to reflect and change their minds. And risking policy decisions insufficiently grounded, either in popular support and understanding or even in the facts of the problem at hand. Issues of trade policy, the functioning of necessary international or transnational organizations come to mind. In particular, with these in mind, there is the specific and pernicious failure, in my view, embodied now in the Internet populism of some of the global NGOs. This isn't governance, and it is never reliably representative. Too often it is just self-righteous posturing.

Let me suggest, by way of example, a better approach to arranging representation and research in ways that are more democratic and more productive. I am thinking here of a method sometimes called deliberative democracy, or deliberative polling. This is a technique for advancing beyond the usual opinion polls and focus groups--and the insiderism of lobbyists--to make policy that is more open and more informed.

An exercise in deliberative public choice might work like this. Imagine that we want a complete rethinking of Canada's international development assistance--foreign aid. That's a controversial area full of preconceptions, not to say prejudices, and criss-crossed by some very complicated policy trade-offs. Should we spend more on foreign aid, or less? Should we rely more on aid, or on trade, for development? On government programs, or market forces? Should we direct aid to particular countries? Only to the poorest? Only to the well governed, because they can *best use* our aid? Or to the badly governed, because they *most need* our aid?

To reach answers to such questions, we could first poll a random sample of Canadians; that's conventional enough. But then we would begin the second step--deliberation. That could mean gathering a sample of citizens together, letting them hear one another's different and contrary views; importantly, it would mean informing them with good, balanced factual information about aid, development, and the implications of various policy alternatives. At best, such a group might discover some new aid policy that accommodates their own educated values and objectives. But even if no consensus emerged, citizens and government would all become better informed about the preferences to be considered and the real choices available.

We can predict this constructive outcome quite confidently, because it has already happened, both experimentally and in real-life applications, in the U.K. on issues as contentious as criminal code revisions, in the U.S. with a national sample of Americans on foreign and domestic policy issues and in the state of Texas. There, for instance, several public utilities have used deliberative polling techniques to shape policies for rates and services reflecting citizen preferences. In Canada, IDRC is working with the Canadian Policy Research Network on what we call "ChoiceWork Dialogues" aimed at exploring citizen values and preferences in areas like development assistance, the economics of work, and delivery of health care. And the Public Policy Forum has plans to explore environmental policy choices through these means.

Novel though it seems, the methodology of deliberative democracy is rooted deep in the underlying principle of royal commissions--the belief that citizens should be heard, that new knowledge can change

minds, that representation and research together can generate more democratic and more effective public policy. One can easily imagine a new generation of royal commissions, enriched by these promising procedures of representation and research, as part of a democratic revival--a new era of citizen participation.

It's been said that the golden age of royal commissions arose in the 19th century, in Britain. That was a time of ferocious social and economic upheaval; the creation of sudden wealth and terrible disparity; a time of anxiety in the workplace and the home. A time, too, when women's aspirations were rising along with their participation in the paid labour force. In other words, a time very like our own. It was, like ours, a time of rising public concern for popular participation in the decisions of the powerful. And practically every important tabling of legislation in Parliament was preceded--and informed--by a royal commission. In the 1850s alone, an average of eight royal commissions were created every single year. We should remember too that it was harder then than it would be now to operate these deliberative commissions--with the advantage of the Internet and cable TV and fast travel and fax machines.

In the tradition of royal commissions, strengthened with new techniques and new technology, Canadians can redesign the procedures of our democracy--to be more inclusive, more accessible, more responsive, and more productive. Florence Bird showed us the way.

Thank you.

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