

# AN INTELLECTUAL IN POLITICS

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The role of the intellectual in politics is well documented in Great Britain but much less discussed in Canada. Tom Kent, who was policy secretary to Lester Pearson and Founding Editor of *Policy Options*, however, is an outstanding example of one Canadian intellectual who helped transform our society. Kent wrote pointed essays on social policy and party democracy right up to the end of his life (like the one in this issue), and his questions need to be answered by the next generation of progressive activists.

Le rôle des intellectuels dans la vie politique est bien documenté en Grande-Bretagne, contrairement au Canada. Le regretté Tom Kent, ancien secrétaire politique de Lester B. Pearson et rédacteur fondateur d'*Options politiques*, offre pourtant l'exemple d'un éminent intellectuel au service de l'évolution de la société canadienne. Jusqu'à son dernier souffle, il aura produit de savantes analyses sur les politiques sociales et la démocratie de partis, soulevant des questions auxquelles devront répondre nos militants progressistes de la prochaine génération.

Tom Kent, who died in Kingston on November 15, 2011, at the age of 89, was Canada's foremost activist-intellectual. To some the combination of the words is an oxymoron: intellectuals think conceptually, debate vociferously the arcane implication of theory and are happiest tucked away in the library. Activists, on the other hand, battle for their values in the public policy arena by mobilizing supporters, outmanoeuvring opponents, creating organizations and winning elections.

Tom Kent dedicated his life to both strands of activity; he thought superbly and acted vigorously. The result is programs like medicare and the Canada Pension Plan programs that help millions of Canadians every day.

But beyond the sheer impact of Kent's career there is another reason to study his life. He was a man of ideas, and the contributions (and frustrations) of being an intellectual in the rough and tumble world of politics are little understood. His successful career offers several lessons.

Like Kent, John Morley was a well-known editor in England in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Fortnightly Review*), and he wrote extensively about the conflict between principles and politics. Morley was a follower of William Gladstone, but unlike Kent he succeeded in winning a seat in Parliament and entered the British cabinet. In his book *On Compromise*, Morley ponders the necessity of an intellectual diluting his principles in order to succeed in a political career. "He who begins life by stifling his convictions," he wrote, "is in a fair way for ending it without any convictions to stifle." Morley believed the ability to mould public opinion to be the spe-

cial province of the intellectual. "But the fact that leading statesmen are of necessity so absorbed in the tasks of the hour, furnishes all the better reason why as many other people as possible should busy themselves in helping to prepare opinion." Like Morley, shaping public opinion certainly became the leitmotif of Kent's career.

While Morley agonized over the necessary compromises that an intellectual in politics is forced to make, Isaiah Berlin, in "The Role of the Intelligentsia," imposes an even more stringent standard. Discussing the Russian intelligentsia of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he writes: "These people gradually became a group, who held that to speak in public, to write, to lecture, imposed on them a direct and peculiar moral obligation."

Born in 1922 into a working-class English family from the Midlands, Kent never forgot the deprivations of the Depression, nor the chances afforded him through scholarships to grammar school and Oxford. He became a passionate advocate of equality of opportunity and this value animated all of his writings. His father, Thomas, a mining mechanic hit by unemployment, was "a man of principle, with strong political opinions and a major influence," recalls Phyllida Kent, his wife for 67 years. The "moral obligation" that Berlin described as a "duty of the intellectual" was for Kent to promote a more equal society. In the paper "Towards a Philosophy of Social Policy," which first made him a national figure in 1960, Kent defined his theme: "Freedom is not just the absence of constraint but, equally, the opportunity to act. For anyone except a hermit, the opportunities of the individual depend on the society in

which he or she lives." Fifty years later, this conviction echoed in his last major paper for the Broadbent Institute: "Social democracy, as I understand it," he wrote, "is a society where the enterprise of productive employment in a market economy is joined with active government to secure the public interest in equality of opportunities and fairness of outcomes." Kent always retained his

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Geordie accent, and more importantly he equally retained the passionate commitment to equality that was forged in the fires of the Depression's impact on the English Midlands.

Max Beloff, a fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, also emphasizes the moral dimension of an intellectual's role. He describes Ramsay Muir, a historian active in the British Liberal Party, as one "who was driven by conscience, I think, rather than ambition to seek for an active role in the politics of his time." He writes too of the dilemma that preoccupied Morley: "What political life gains or loses when it recruits intellectuals and what they gain or lose from the experience of immersion in it." But shrewdly, Beloff makes the point that the intellectual's role is usually advisory: "The intellectual can give his advice; he has no means of knowing how seriously the president is going to take it or what other advice on the same topic is being sought at the same time." Therefore, the intellectual has no leverage except to rise by the quality of his ideas, by acquiring a patron or by running for office. While Kent tried all three avenues, it was in the roles of public advocate and political adviser that he made his mark.

**G**raduating from Oxford at age 19 in 1941 with a first in politics,

philosophy and economics, Kent joined the wartime intelligence service at Bletchley Park. He and his future wife, Phyllida, worked as part of the team that penetrated the German "ultra-secret." Co-workers at Bletchley, a generation later, they also worked together to edit and launch *Policy Options* in 1980. Next to Pierre Trudeau, Kent had the most incisive intelligence I ever witnessed, and it

does not surprise me that his was the kind of logical mind suitable for code-breaking.

Connections made at Bletchley were also critical to Kent's first career as a journalist. The famous editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, A.P. Wadsworth, offered Kent a job in 1946. Wadsworth taught his disciples to write taut journalistic prose: Wadsworth's message was that "an article in the *Guardian* is no good unless people read it on their way to work." Kent learned this lesson well, and one of the secrets to his success was his clean crisp prose. He also learned to compose in a hurry and to deadline, a trait as critical for an aspiring speech writer as for a journalist.

Plain words were Kent's hallmark. In launching *Policy Options* in 1980, for example, Kent explained why there was a need for such a magazine based on the principle that "all policy options can be intelligently examined in plain language." Achieving that goal with his academic contributors was a challenge — Kent ruefully reflected that "the work of editing *Options* was chiefly a struggle of reconciling the principle of plain words with the necessity of drawing much of the magazine's content from people more accustomed to writing for fellow specialists."

In 1950, Kent became assistant editor at the *Economist*, where he was mentored by another famous editor,

Geoffrey Crowther. Through Crowther's sponsorship, Kent was invited to join a dining club at Brown's Hotel, where he mixed with luminaries like the future Prime Minister Harold MacMillan. This period was the golden age of British public policy: Britain had just won the war, founded the welfare state and led the world intellectually with thinkers like John Maynard Keynes. Describing the public servants recruited in postwar Britain, Peter Hennessy explains that "they began their official lives believing that everything was achievable." Certainly, Kent never lost his faith in government: in 2004 he told the CBC that the role of the national government "is to show that we can still do big things together."

Kent first visited Canada in 1951, at the invitation of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and was offered the job of editor. Kent declined but decided in 1954 to accept and moved his family to Winnipeg. Brought up in the journalistic traditions of the *Manchester Guardian* that "comment is free, but facts are sacred," Kent brought an independent view to the venerable Liberal mouthpiece. Paramount to Kent was a progressive world view that he had absorbed in England, party affiliation was secondary. Kent's *Free Press*, for example, supported Duff Roblin, the new Conservative leader in Manitoba, rather than the long-time Liberal government of Douglas Lloyd Campbell. Kent maintained his independent stance even as a senior political adviser: in 1965, for example, as the Lester Pearson government moved steadily toward an election call, Kent pointedly entitled one of his memos "Strategy for Government: Not Election Strategy."

**P**lain words, separating facts from opinion, and independence, these journalistic virtues were displayed in all of Kent's various careers. But there is another characteristic of a journalist that defined Kent, though this trait is

more controversial. I have found many journalists to be of critical temperament with some even veering toward cynicism. Perhaps because they report daily on the foibles and vanities of humankind, journalists rarely take statements at face value but look for the hidden meanings within. Given

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the mendacities of politicians and spin doctors, this may be good for our democracy, but it is thoroughly uncomfortable when someone is subject to such scrutiny. However, Tom Kent was critical in the best sense of the word — he found logical fallacies in arguments. He held high standards both for himself and others and as a result was frequently disappointed. Kent, for example, was proud of the accomplishments of Pearson's government: he often pointed with pride to the 2003 survey of public policy experts in *Policy Options* that assessed Pearson as the best prime minister of the previous half century. But his pride in Pearson did not sway his critical judgment. He writes in his memoirs that Pearson's reversal of decisions showed "a weakness at the knees" and that "I had found feet of clay...with his treatment of Guy Favreau and Walter Gordon." Kent always maintained the critical and independent mind of a journalist — he was never an acolyte, even when serving in the PM's court.

One way for an intellectual to have influence in politics, Beloff advised, is to educate the public. Alternatively, one can join forces with an up-and-coming figure or run for office oneself.

"I had not contemplated before 1957," Kent wrote, "that I would ever be involved in an active political role." Through the Liberal pedigree of the *Free Press*, however, Kent had access to the leading ministers of the Louis St-Laurent government, especially Lester

Pearson. The two became friends, and Kent helped write Pearson's 1957 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. In 1958, when Pearson became Liberal leader, only to suffer a devastating election defeat at the hands of John Diefenbaker, Kent was drawn into the small circle of advisers and activists

dedicated to making him prime minister. Keith Davey, Pearson's election organizer, recalled that "Kent was the most left-wing liberal I have ever known. Most of us were determined to move the party to the left, but no matter how far we went, Kent wanted us to go further."

Kent soon became a one-man intellectual blood bank for the Liberal Party. In 1960, he wrote "Towards a Philosophy of Social Policy" for the Kingston Thinkers' Conference, which was to shape the future policy directions of the Liberal Party. The concrete ideas in his paper — medicare, employment training, regional development, student scholarships and social assistance — became the essence of Pearson's election platform. This success made Kent an irresistible target for Diefenbaker, who cackled about "the leader of the leader."

In this heightened political atmosphere, after serving as Pearson's main speech writer in the 1962 campaign, Kent then entered into one of the most quixotic episodes of his career — he decided to run for a seat in the House of Commons in the election of 1963. It was not surprising that he decided to run for a seat in Parliament — so did his peers Walter Gordon, Allan MacEachen and Maurice Lamontagne, What was interesting was the seat that he chose was Burnaby-Coquitlam in British Columbia (a province with which he had no connection) to run against the legendary Tommy Douglas. Kent's explanation for running in the safest NDP seat in the country was

"simply to give him (Douglas) a good run and thereby help the campaign elsewhere."

We will never know what Kent's future influence might have been had he become an MP. His colleague Maurice Lamontagne, a distinguished economist who had also written an excellent paper for the Kingston Thinkers' Conference, was successful in winning a seat in the 1963 election but had

a very unhappy parliamentary career while subjected to Diefenbaker's repeated attacks. The same thing might have happened to Kent.

Kent became instead Prime Minister Pearson's policy secretary, and for the next few years he fought to persuade cabinet and Parliament to implement the platform that he had drafted. Kent considered "medicare the most important of all the social reforms introduced by the Pearson government." Strengthening the prime minister's resolve, liaising with ministers, driving the civil service machine, while still holding the pen on Pearson's major statements, Kent's role in the Pearson government was absolutely crucial. He personally negotiated, for example, the compromise deal with Premier Jean Lesage of Quebec that created the Quebec and Canada Pension Plans.

Once had a glimpse of what made Tom Kent so effective as policy secretary. As colleagues at Queen's University, we were both members of a congenial supper club organized by the late Peter Leslie that came together to discuss books and the issues of the day. One evening, Ed Broadbent, John Meisel, Keith Banting, Tom Kent and myself were discussing *The Spirit Level*, a book that argued that more equal societies have a better chance of success. Kent absorbed the discussion — the merits of equality of opportunity, political realities and so on — and when it was his turn to speak, he first summarized the points that all of us

had made earlier and then quickly turned to developing a concrete program that could achieve the goals discussed. He sketched out how the child tax benefit would have to be raised, how to handle federal-provincial disputes and how revenues could be enhanced to pay for such a program.

For the rest of the evening, the group debated the merits of Kent's plan. There was a concreteness about Kent's thinking that allowed him to effortlessly take general principles and turn them into nitty-gritty legislation and taxes. Among that distinguished company in Peter Leslie's dining room in 2009, there was little doubt that at age 87 Tom Kent was still the leader of the policy pack.

In 1965, Kent left the Prime Minister's Office to become deputy minister of manpower and immigration under its new dynamic minister, Jean Marchand. Kent recalls that the decision was made because Pearson "wanted a quieter life, with less criticism from his more conservative associates and with the new cabinet, my activism would have been embarrassing to him. After eight years, we had come to the point where it was best that our ways should part."

In 1968, when Pierre Trudeau became prime minister, both Marchand and Kent moved on to create the new Department of Regional Economic Expansion. Kent was fond of Marchand, but he was never entirely comfortable in the Trudeau government. While many in the business community thought Trudeau a closet socialist, Kent found him too orthodox in the handling of the economy: "My objection to the course taken by the Trudeau government was that it breached the social contract." In 1971, contemplating a return to journalism, Kent left Ottawa, but instead he was recruited to move to Nova Scotia to continue his work in regional development by becoming president of the Cape Breton Development Corporation and then the Sydney Steel Corporation. He subsequently became Dean of Administrative Studies at



*Policy Options* photo

**Tom Kent, our Founding Editor, at a McGill University Conference in Montreal in 2003. To the end of his life, he wrote articles for the magazine he founded in 1980.**

Dalhousie University and eventually moved to Kingston, Ontario, to become a fellow of the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University.

In this last phase of his career, Kent became one of Canada's best known public intellectuals. He wrote at a prodigious rate on many topics but had especially pointed things to say about social policy and democracy. Future Canadian progressives should take note.

In "The Social Democracy of Canadian Federalism," his last major essay, commissioned by the Broadbent

Institute and published in this issue of *Policy Options*, Kent recommends a major increase in refundable tax credits. Providing money directly to citizens avoids the anomalies and confusions associated with intergovernmental transfers. However, the key issue that Kent highlights is how to pay for any increased benefit. He concludes that it is political will that is lacking, not the policy mechanisms to achieve this goal. "Federal revenues," he writes, "can indeed be much increased, but only by extending the bases from which taxes are effectively

collected. “The indictment of the NDP, as well as such left wing as remains in the Liberal Party, is that their politicians have been as yet too timid to embrace and popularize progressive tax reform.”

Kent is undoubtedly correct that social advances require substantial increases in revenue. Unfortunately, unlike tax cuts, tax reform has never

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been popular. In 1970, the Trudeau government introduced the capital gains tax and nearly lost the subsequent election; in 1981 Allan MacEachen attempted to reform taxes but was forced to retreat; and Brian Mulroney’s far-sighted introduction of the GST reduced his party to shambles. Progressives are quick to mouth clichés about corporate rip-offs, but they mostly avoid the substantive issue that Kent identified — how do you pay for social democracy? The answer to that question will determine the fate of this philosophy.

Kent also worried about the state of Canadian democracy, especially the diminished contributions of the media and the party system in helping citizens to make informed choices. In 1980, after the Thomson and Southam newspaper chains closed the *Ottawa Journal* and *Winnipeg Tribune*, Kent was appointed chair of the Royal Commission on Newspapers. Kent feared that the power and economic biases of newspaper owners and their advertisers would unduly influence the independent judgment of working journalists. “Concentration in the ownership of newspapers is an old story for Canadians,” he wrote, “and a sad story because politicians have stood aside indifferently while a necessary underpinning of democracy has been weakened.” The Kent Royal Commission proposed to restrict the percentage of any region’s press one chain could control and recommended strict separation between the print and the electronic media. The Trudeau

government passed an order in council in 1982 prohibiting the common ownership of a newspaper and broadcasting station, but the incoming Mulroney government revoked the order. The present situation, Kent believed, is even worse, because “concentration has been joined with convergence in media ownership.” Since concentration is now so embedded, lit-

tle can be done, he lamented. He hoped that the CBC could be strengthened to provide a counterbalance to the commercial media. Today that seems a faint hope.

Kent found the collapse of democracy within the Liberal Party to be a dire situation. Echoing Edmund Burke, he defined a political party as “a voluntary association of people sharing views about public policy.” Kent was active politically in an age when Liberal Party volunteers mattered — the leader’s office did not control the outcome of the Kingston Thinkers’ Conference, thousands of delegates met in a 1961 policy rally to change and approve the forthcoming election platform, and in 1966 it was the Liberal Party convention that thwarted the efforts of the Department of Finance to throttle medicare at its birth. In analyzing today’s Liberal Party, however, Kent wrote in *Policy Options* before the 2006 Liberal leadership convention: “Membership is not broad enough, it was too long a moneyed machine. Its policies have been too much improvisation made from the top and for the moment.”

Seeing the Liberal Party even weaker today than in 1958, he advocated a reform agenda to reverse the decades of top-down management. The Liberal Party could only be revitalized, he argued, if local ridings had real power, and real power meant that they should keep the money they raise rather than sending most of it to the party head-

quarters. Right to the end, he never stopped fighting for a fairer Canada and a more democratic Liberal Party.

Tom Kent rose to the top of all of his chosen professions. He was a newspaper editor, policy adviser to the prime minister, deputy minister, president of Crown corporations, dean, founding editor of *Policy Options* and a Companion of the Order of Canada.

Yet he was a modest man: in the fall of 2002 I asked him to be the keynote speaker at a conference of activists, “Searching for a New Liberalism.” He was happy to participate but demurred at being given such a prominent place. Surely, he protested, there were others better suited to discuss modern problems. I equally insisted and finally, as a personal favour, he agreed to give the major address. His speech on public financing of parties was the highlight of the gathering. For Tom Kent, politics was always about ideas, never about one’s position.

I was lucky to have known Tom Kent for more than 40 years. Tall, thin, invariably smoking a pipe when I first knew him, Kent resembled an English don. As a fellow Manitoban, he took me under his wing when I began working in Ottawa in the mid-1960s. Always generous with his time and advice, he was unflinching polite but logically rigorous and fearless in telling the truth as he saw it. I never sent him a paper or an idea that he didn’t improve.

Possessed of an acute intelligence and ferocious energy, Tom Kent helped to transform his adopted country of Canada. In doing so, he improved the lot of millions. His intellectual capital never depleted and his activist side never wavered. His career is an inspiration to anyone with ideas who hopes to change their society for the better.

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