



ADDRESS TO THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT HISTORY GROUP

## **Liberalism Across the Atlantic**

Bournemouth, United Kingdom – Sunday 17 September 2000

*Speech by  
Akaash Maharaj  
National Policy Chair of the Liberal Party of Canada  
to the Autumn Policy Conference of the  
Liberal Democratic Party of the United Kingdom*

Thank you for your kind introduction, Duncan.

Fellow Liberals, it is a pleasure and an honour to be with you this evening, and speaking both for myself and for the Liberal Party of Canada, I thank you for the invitation to participate in your conference, which I like to think is part of the enduring friendship between our parties and our countries.

Indeed, being here is something of a double homecoming for me.

It is a personal homecoming since, as Dr Wallace mentioned, I cut my political teeth as a student in Britain, while serving as President of my university's Student Union.

It is, however, also a philosophical homecoming, as Canadian Liberals have always looked towards 19th Century British liberal democratic thought as the well-spring from which we initially drew our founding values. As time has passed, our parties have of course walked through the fires of different challenges, and pursued different policy objectives as the paths of our nations diverged, but I still feel as powerfully as ever, that we remain rooted together in our common belief in the primacy of human liberty, the defence of human rights, and the pursuit of human welfare.

I have been asked to speak today on contemporary Liberal politics in Canada. I should like to say that this is a bodice ripping tale of malice and envy in the corridors of power, of seduction and betrayal in the high offices of state. Unfortunately, given that I will be speaking on federal Canadian politics, that is all spectacularly unlikely.

Nevertheless, this is a tremendously exciting era for Canada, and I should venture to say that in the judgement of history, the next twelve months will inevitably come to be seen as the decisive moment for Canadian liberalism and for the very destiny of the national enterprise.

To give you a sense of context:

The Liberal Party has had a majority government for seven years. Re-elected in 1997, we most recently returned to power in 1993, in a victory so all consuming, that we did not simply defeat the previous Progressive Conservative government, but dealt that party what is proving to be its death blow. Having held an absolute majority, the Progressive Conservatives, Canada's oldest and first governing party, were reduced by us to two seats, thus losing legal recognition as a bona fide political party, and succumbing to the greatest defeat of a governing political party in the history of parliamentary democracy.

We inherited from the Progressive Conservatives the largest deficit and largest accumulated debt Canada had ever seen, double-digit unemployment, galloping inflation, dismissal by international bond rating agencies as “a snowy Third-World state”, and a mood of profound public despair.

In the seven years since, we have turned a \$42bn deficit into a \$10bn surplus while still cutting taxes by \$58bn over five years; we have reduced unemployment to its lowest level in a quarter century; held inflation down at levels unknown for two generations; and have seen Canada rated by the United Nation's human development index as the best place in the world in which to live, in each of those seven consecutive years.

As the architect of these changes, the Liberal Party now stands at 50% in the polls, a full 30% ahead of our nearest rivals, with most voters whose first preference is an opposition party listing us as their second preference. We remain the only party with seats and support in every region of our pan-continental country. Added to this, the party infrastructure is arguably at the peak of its powers, drawing upon the institutional strength of our having been in government for some seventy of the past one-hundred years, more than the PRI of Mexico, more than the Communist Party of Russia, more indeed than any party of any country on any continent under any system of government, apart from the Communist Party of Mongolia.

In essence, Canadians are living through a period of sustained prosperity without parallel in our nation's brief but storied history, and liberalism is enjoying a Gladstonian ascendancy over the body politic.

And the result of all this, is the very real risk that we as a country and as a party may now be staring into the abyss of destruction.

One of life's great perversities is that success is often the incubator of failure, and accordingly, the triumph of the Liberal Party may have made the nation safe for those who would elevate greed and regional chauvinism to the level of a legitimate political philosophy.

Like nature, politics abhors a vacuum, and as the Progressive Conservative Party heaves its last breaths, rushing into the void left by this centre-right movement with which the Liberal Party has traditionally alternated power, has been a pair of regionally based immoderate parties. To the left, the Bloc Québécois, which would explicitly destroy Canada; to the right, the Reform Party, which would in my view make our country impossible to hold together.

The peril, both to Canada and to Canadian liberalism, is that irrespective of favourable polls, no party has ever won three consecutive peace-time majorities. The population, even if satisfied with the governing party, has always held that democracy demands change to prevent government from becoming complacent, intellectually impotent, sclerotic. Moreover, the growing public temptation to view the deep ease ushered in over the last few years as the permanent cast of the economic landscape is leading Canadians to become less risk-averse than is our wont as a people.

This combination forms a noxious brew: an electorate whose tendency will be towards the restive, a population potentially made reckless by prosperity, and the absence of alternative parties within the political mainstream. This could easily culminate in the election of a profoundly illiberal government, despite the liberalism of Canadians.

As its name implies, the Bloc Québécois is dedicated to Québec nationalism and secession. It rejects Canada's liberal traditions as a multicultural, bilingual nation, and has as its stated objective the undoing of the federation, to create in Québec a unilingual, more homogenous state. When Jacques Parizeau, the past separatist Premier of Québec, rose to concede defeat in the Québec referendum, he railed from the podium against, "money and the ethnic vote" for thwarting him. As the current third party, and past official opposition, the Bloc could easily hold the balance of power in a hung parliament.

Reform, the current official opposition, has, in my opinion, clambered to power by appealing to the most unworthy impulses of human frailty. Its members advocate flat taxes, self-styled "family values" legislation, decentralisation of federal powers, privatisation in the public health care system, repeal of gun control, abrogation of treaties with Native Canadians, and on and on and on.

Cementing the illiberal twin threat of these two parties is that, given their common commitment to eviscerating federal powers, the Bloc Québécois and Reform have ruminated over forming a common front to defeat the Liberal Party.

My sincere belief is that the next election will be less a contest for office, and more a battle for the soul of our nation. It is a battle we must win, if only because the consequences of failure are simply too terrible to contemplate.

We will have one absolute tactical advantage. Our adversaries have always focused on what they believe to be our strengths: strong policies, a strong organisation, and a strong communications apparatus. What I believe they fail to understand, perhaps resist understanding, is that we have always drawn the elixir of our strengths not from within, but from without. As heretical as it is to say this in political circles, our success has never been built on the genius of the Liberal Party itself, and any MP or party officer who believes otherwise has deluded himself with hubris. Our success has flowed entirely out of the fact that Canadians are, on the whole, an enlightened and therefore liberal people. As long as we have stayed true to liberal values, have served as a mirror in which Canadians could see reflected back their better natures, victory has been Canada's.

I am, therefore, confident that, though the tides of historical precedent may flow against us in the next election, the national character will pull with us.

Flowing out of my role as National Policy Chair, I am part of the team charged by the Prime Minister with developing the *Red Book*, our platform or election manifesto, for the upcoming election. My hope is to create a document and structure a campaign around the basic championing of liberalism. Ironically, we owe the Bloc and Reform a debt of gratitude for reminding us that although the torch of liberalism has been burning across three centuries, and has spread its glow over the world, we have an undiminished duty to constantly rage against the dying of the light.

Dr. Hill and Dr. MacDonald have given an excellent exposition on liberalism in North America, and I am not so foolish as to try to compete with them. I will, however, say that at this point, my own thoughts are around three principles for the *Red Book*:

Firstly, that liberalism in Canada demands a commitment from the federal government to national unity. Our federal system allows for the expression of regional identities, for a plurality of approaches, and for government to be exercised closer to the governed. This must be complemented by the enforcement of national standards, a nation-wide defence of rights and a nation-wide accountability to responsibilities, and the exercise of national leadership that moves the country forward with purpose. More importantly still, the national government must play a vital role in bringing Canadians together in support of the national enterprise, fostering a sense of national identity where diversity is a strength to be valued and not a weakness to be feared, and where citizens stand equal not only before the law, but also before one another.

Secondly, that we emphasise that our conception of liberalism is predicated on the insight that in a free and democratic society, prosperity and social justice are inseparable. To those who argue that the laws of commerce and the rules of human decency must be kept separate, the liberal reply must be that in the long term, an unjust society can never prosper as it must ultimately collapse in on itself, and that a poor economy will ultimately allow the strong to tyrannise over the weak. Economic policy can not be abstracted from human need, and social policy can not be structured without fiscal discipline.

Thirdly, that we celebrate Canadian liberals' embrace of globalisation's vast powers to foster community across nations; to speed the exchange of ideas and ideals, and thus catalyse international understanding; and to accelerate trade and generate wealth. Equally, however, we understand that because these powers emerge from the transcending of the borders upon which states are based, and within which the powers of democracies are circumscribed, globalisation threatens to enslave those nations who do not master it. A liberal approach to the globalised market, therefore, demands that Canada press for the integration of emerging international trade agreements with the established framework of protocols on human rights, environmental protection, and cultural diversity.

In the final analysis, however, Canadian liberalism is reducible to a single article of faith: a belief that our well-being as individuals are inextricably linked to the well being of every other person.

Accordingly, we celebrate individual initiative and aspire towards a meritocracy, but expect those who benefit the most to bear the greatest obligation; we believe that every right is balanced by a responsibility; we demand the greatest liberty for the individual that is compatible with liberty for all; and we hold that election is not a license to rule, but a contract to serve.

Our next election will put these values to the test. There are many who argue that the rise of the hard right will prove irresistible, that we must accommodate their orthodoxies as a permanent fixture of the twenty-first century political order, or we will face defeat. They may be right. But I should rather lose government, than lose our reason for governing.

Canada became a liberal nation less because of the exercise of power and more because of the noble struggle against illiberal injustice. I know that if we stay true to our liberal principles, then irrespective of the results at the ballot box, we can only win.

I thank you for your time and your attention, and on behalf of the Liberal Party of Canada, join you in celebrating our shared values.

- 30 -

Akaash Maharaj, © 2000

Web site: [www.Maharaj.org](http://www.Maharaj.org)  
E-mail: [Akaash@Maharaj.org](mailto:Akaash@Maharaj.org)



*version française aussi disponible*