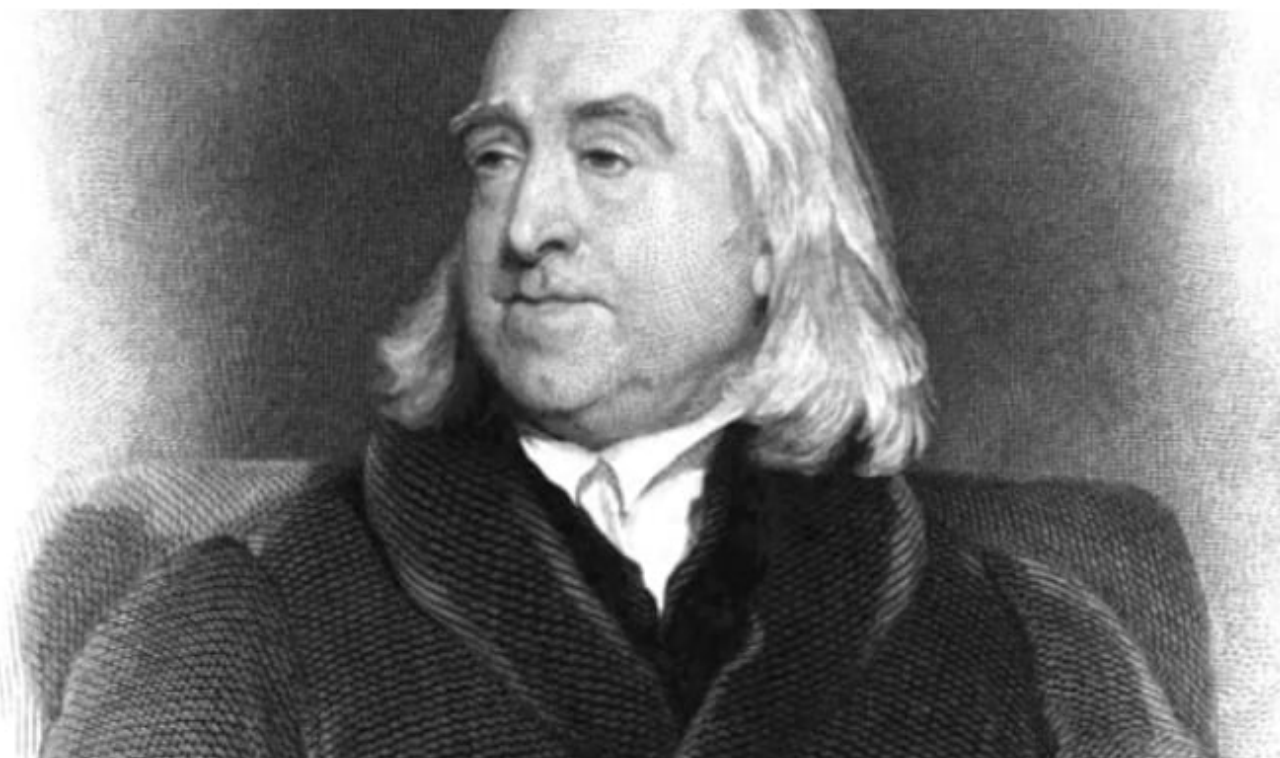


Britain's human rights debate and why Canada should listen

By Patrick Keeney

A significant conversation is taking place in Britain. For the first time since the post-war settlement, serious voices in Parliament are questioning whether [the European Convention on Human Rights](#) (ECHR) benefits the country that helped establish it. On October 29, when Nigel Farage introduced his bill to withdraw the United Kingdom from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), [ninety-six MPs, including senior Conservatives, supported it.](#)



Jeremy Bentham Courtesy St Neots Museum

While this support does not yet make it law, it indicates a notable change in attitude. Notably, the British Labour Party's muted support for the ECHR illustrates how quickly institutional loyalty to rights can diminish under political pressure. [When only sixty-three of over four hundred Labour MPs voted to uphold the Convention](#), it became clear that the

treaty commands less conviction than it once did. What was once dismissed as fringe populism has entered the realm of serious political argument.

We would be mistaken to see this merely as a parochial quarrel within British politics. The unease stems not only from the loss of sovereignty, [the juridification of politics](#), and the erosion of civic trust, but also from a deeper sense of alienation – from moral coherence, from local authority, and from the habits of self-government that once sustained liberal democracy, all of which find echoes across the Atlantic. Throughout the Anglosphere, “rights talk” has become the dominant moral idiom, while the older vocabulary of duty, virtue, and the common good has fallen into neglect. The British argument with Strasbourg is, in truth, part of a wider reckoning – one that Canada, too, cannot avoid.

The debate in Britain about leaving the ECHR mainly revolves around the UK’s sovereignty. Critics say that unelected judges in Strasbourg have limited and eroded Westminster’s power, which blocks democratic choices on issues like immigration, policing, and deportation. Critics stress the need for self-governance, arguing that a free and democratic people must create their own laws.

Furthermore, critics contend that the judges in Strasbourg have assumed a quasi-legislative role, inventing [new rights](#) and thereby extending their reach into the domestic affairs of sovereign nations. What might appear to be a technical dispute over jurisdiction in fact points to a deeper cultural condition.

This judicial activism mirrors a wider malaise within Anglo-American law – a kind of moral inflation in which every grievance is elevated to the status of a “right.” The language of rights, once a moral safeguard, now tempts us to confuse private desires with guaranteed rights. The result is a moral economy awash in claims.

The absurd extremes of this logic were recently on display

in [Grimsby](#), where a town councillor lodged a human rights complaint – rather than a defamation suit – after being called a “harridan” and a “witch” on Facebook, alleging sex-based discrimination. That such a petty slight could be framed as a human rights violation reveals how far the language of rights has drifted from its moral moorings.

The case – perhaps trivial in its details but revealing in its symbolism – illustrates how the machinery of human rights, originally created to safeguard citizens from government tyranny, can now be employed for any perceived slight. It is undoubtedly unpleasant to be called names on social media; however, when every minor grievance is treated as a human rights violation, the moral authority of human rights diminishes.

The incident highlights a society so obsessed with rights discourse that even wounded pride seeks a judicial remedy.

Here lies the paradox: the more rights multiply, the less they signify. What began as a moral vocabulary to safeguard human dignity against the overreach of political power has metastasized into a bureaucratic idiom – one that inflates grievance, diminishes meaning, and debases the very ideals it was created to uphold.

The British philosopher [Jeremy Bentham](#) (1747-1832) predicted this danger when he dismissed natural rights as “nonsense on stilts,” warning that rights detached from any sense of the good would lose all moral significance. Once separated from a meaningful idea of human flourishing, he warned, rights become empty formalities. In our time, Bentham’s “nonsense” has gained an office. It issues directives, circulates memos, and oversees thought, confusing moral seriousness with bureaucratic enthusiasm. What started as a language of conscience has hardened into a tool of bureaucratic control.

This moral confusion lies at the heart of the debate,

exemplified by the case of the Grimsby town councillor. Essentially, the expansion of rights talk causes us to confuse offence with injury and moral disagreement with bias and discrimination. Bentham's warning – that rights without a concept of the good are incoherent – has rarely been more relevant. The inflation of rights talk has led to a public moral discourse that becomes louder even as our shared moral vocabulary diminishes.

It is a rather anodyne observation to note that public enthusiasm for rights increases when they align with our preferences and wanes when they protect the unpopular. Yet this very inconsistency reveals a deep confusion about what rights are for. They were never meant to mirror our appetites, but to discipline them.

None of this is an argument against rights. It is a call to reaffirm their moral foundation. The idea of universal human rights originated in the Western tradition, which regarded them as expressions of the [inherent dignity of every human person](#), regardless of their station in life. They are rooted in the moral law and directed toward the good. Rights stem from obligation: what we owe to God, our neighbours, and the moral order of things.

Detached from that foundation, they risk becoming mere instruments of vanity and self-assertion – a moral counterfeit in which appetite dons the robes of virtue. When rights are severed from their moral purpose and stripped of their meaning, they cease to elevate the human spirit and instead become a rhetoric of entitlement, a language through which desire masquerades as principle, and the will of the individual eclipses the claims of the greater good. Rights cannot endure as hollow legal formalities; they live only when sustained by the moral convictions and civic virtues of those who claim them. For Canadians, the lesson is both cautionary and optimistic: the strength of our rights will always reflect the strength of our character. Ultimately, the defence of human rights – our own and those of others –

depends not on courts or conventions, but on a people still able to distinguish liberty from licence and conscience from convenience.

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