

Recovering First Principles: Humility as the moral ground of democracy

By Patrick Keeney

David Livingstone at Vancouver Island University has recently edited a volume commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of *Bankrupt Education: The Decline of Liberal Education in Canada*, the seminal work by Peter C. Emberley and Waller R. Newell.



Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker, Canadian patriot and exponent of personal freedom Gar Lunney, 1957. Photo taken for the National Film Board

The book, published in 1994, was a clarion call to recover the moral and philosophical foundations of higher learning in Canada. My contribution to the volume revisited what was, until quite recently, an

unremarkable truth: that education, to be worthy of the name, must be guided by first principles. Without a clear understanding of its ends – of what education is for – our universities inevitably degenerate into credentialing factories, preoccupied with technique, process, and utility while neglecting the cultivation of wisdom, character, and the civic virtues required to sustain a democracy.

The crisis of liberal education, like that of democracy itself, stems from a forgetfulness of fundamental principles – losing sight of moral development, purpose, and humility. When

liberal learning no longer considers its ultimate goals, it falls into mere instrumentality – focusing solely on measurable results, employability statistics, and the efficient development of skills, while neglecting the higher aims of helping students think about what makes life meaningful.

Similarly, when democracy loses humility, it turns self-righteous and punitive, reducing politics to moral grandstanding. Both politics and universities depend on acknowledging human fallibility and sharing a commitment to truth. To forget this is to abandon the qualities that make learning and liberty possible.

Humility is not a sign of weakness but the essential principle of a free and civilized society. It reflects the Socratic wisdom that genuine knowledge starts with acknowledging one's own ignorance. In public life, humility underpins authentic dialogue, without which persuasion becomes coercion and disagreement fosters contempt. Therefore, humility is not just a minor civic virtue; it is fundamental for reasoned discussion and the common good.

Canada's recent political history offers sobering examples of what happens when humility is absent. For instance, the 2022 trucker convoy and the government's use of the *Emergencies Act* in response highlighted a democracy struggling to communicate with itself. The government saw its opponents not as fellow citizens to persuade but as enemies to defeat. The demonization of the truckers was not just a political issue but also a moral one. Justin Trudeau's government claimed the mantle of righteousness, leaving no room to listen or seek compromise. Instead of engaging with them or even making a minimal effort to understand their grievances, the prime minister chose to denounce the truckers, attacking them with a barrage of reckless and self-righteous slanders.

The same dynamic pervades the rhetoric surrounding climate

policy, reconciliation, and the identity politics of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). On these issues, the national conversation too often devolves into a liturgy, where dissent is treated as heresy and nuance is viewed as betrayal. For example, when public figures question the wisdom of carbon taxes or the feasibility of Net Zero, they are accused of “denying the science.” When citizens express concerns about the excesses of “reconciliation” initiatives or the erosion of merit in hiring and education, they are labelled reactionaries or racists. Such moral absolutism mistakes conviction for virtue and confuses sincerity with wisdom. It is the opposite of humility. Crucially, it is the acid that corrodes democratic debate.

A culture that esteems humility would find equilibrium between conviction and curiosity. It would regard disagreement not as proof of malice but as an invitation to understanding. Such a virtue sustains both liberal education and democratic life. From Plato to Newman, the wisest minds have insisted that the university’s true purpose is to cultivate judgment, reason, and moral responsibility – to form citizens capable of thoughtful deliberation and civic friendship. This, in turn, requires intellectual humility: the recognition that truth surpasses opinion, and that wisdom begins with a willingness to submit to reason, evidence, and the accumulated insights of tradition.

These same virtues must also guide the public sphere. Citizens shaped by humility listen before judging, deliberate before acting, and temper passion with prudence. A society that values certainty and self-assertion over reflection quickly forgets the habits necessary for self-government. When conversation turns into a contest of moral purity, democracy deteriorates into mutual contempt. Humility, then, is democracy’s core and guiding principle.

Here, the conservative temperament has traditionally held sway. The conservative, in the classical sense argued by

Edmund Burke, sees politics as stewardship rather than innovation – an act of gratitude for inherited order and an acknowledgment of human limitations.

In Canadian history, this prudential sensibility was once evident in the restraint of leaders such as John Diefenbaker, whose *Bill of Rights* emerged from a moral conviction that freedom demands humility before the law, not the assertion of ideology.

It could also be seen in the quiet federalism of Lester Pearson, who managed to balance moral aspiration with political realism. Both men exemplified what might be called the tragic sensibility in politics: an awareness that society cannot be perfected.

In contrast, today's politics too often resembles what Michael Oakeshott called "rationalism in politics" – a belief that human life can be shaped through policy and technique. Ottawa's central planning approach, seen in sprawling bureaucracies and moralized slogans like "because it's 2015," reflects this very illusion. It replaces prudence with moral performance.

Whether the issue is energy, immigration, or public health, government increasingly acts with a kind of moral certainty that leaves no space for dissent. Challenging the official line is then viewed as unscientific, unpatriotic, or worse.

Humility serves as the antidote to arrogance. It reminds us that truth exists, but no one wholly owns it; that freedom requires both discipline and expression; and that persuasion, not coercion, is the language of the free. It strikes a balance between relativism and dogmatism, safeguarding liberty without succumbing to nihilism. As Pascal observed, "We know too much to be skeptics, but not enough to be dogmatists" – a reminder of the narrow path between doubt and certainty that defines the human condition.

Humility is the virtue that guides both learning and citizenship toward their true aims: wisdom and justice. Without humility, democracy becomes performative, driven by rhetoric soaked in self-righteousness. With humility, democracy becomes an educational force – a school for the virtues of freedom.

To regain humility is to rediscover the fundamental principle of democratic life: recognizing that we are not infallible in our judgements, not possessors of absolute truth but seekers of it.

From this recognition emerge the civic virtues of patience, gratitude, and restraint, which enable free societies to coexist.

Humility, when properly understood, is not the surrender of conviction but its moral foundation – the quiet courage to live with the tension between knowing and not knowing, between freedom and order, and between the possible and the ideal.

Only through such humility can democracy – and the education that sustains it – be restored as a genuinely human endeavour: one rooted not in vanity or power, but in the shared pursuit of truth, wisdom, and the common good.

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