SERVING THE COMMON GOOD:
ETHICS-BASED CIVIC EDUCATION AND PUBLIC SERVICE

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Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In democracies such as Canada, the shaping and functioning of our communities, society and system of governance is the work of many hands. I wish to congratulate St. Jerome's University and the academic community here in Waterloo for your contributions, including the present initiative to establish the St. Jerome's Centre for Responsible Citizenship and the Master's Degree Programme in Public Service.

Reflecting the mission of this centre, I have chosen as the title for this lecture: *Serving the Common Good: Ethics-based Civic Education and Public Service*. The central focus of tonight's lecture is the importance and value of public service. The basis, and several dimensions, of this importance can be demonstrated through an exploration of linkages among the common good, its pursuit through public service, and the social foundations of ethics. The potential role of civic education, as both a direct support for ethical public service, and a contributor to the social foundation of this activity will also warrant attention.

Given that this lecture is taking place in an institution dedicated to scholarship and critical thinking, however, and is being presented to an audience of scholars and thinkers, I hope to do more than merely articulate feelings that I believe we all share. I want, to the extent possible in the limited time available, to try and show that these feelings reflect conclusions that can be demonstrated by reasoned argument. Most importantly, public service is not just an occupation. It is a vocation, indeed a very noble calling. A calling to do good. I wish to submit that the public service needs to be understood as a deeply ethical activity, directed to maintaining the social foundations that among other things make ethical activity possible, as well as serving the more immediate objectives of public sector work.

I would like to begin my reflection this evening by addressing the social foundations of ethics, law and rights. Let me invite you to imagine a lone, single person on a distant abandoned island. Our solitary islander mounts the highest peak on the atoll, holds up his pencil and cries out "this is MY pencil, I have a right to this property."

What is wrong with this image? Probably many things. However, for pedagogical purposes, I wish to suggest that the incongruous character – the apparent

pointlessness – of one person making a claim of "right" when that person is in isolation helps to illustrate that, at a minimum, the conceptualization of "right" requires a dyad. That is, right by essential definition is a social reality. People constitute *the material cause* of human rights.

This, of course, is a very Aristotelian argument. In Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle argues that the city comes into being for the sake of living (i.e., self-sufficiency), but that "… it exists for the sake of the good life."(1) With this claim, he is not associating society with mere comfort or convenience, but arguing that it enables human beings to fulfil their *telos*, by leading lives of virtue, resulting in happiness. This is the basis for Aristotle's famous claim that life in the city is therefore necessary for anyone who wishes to be completely human. The quality that distinguishes human beings from the beasts and the gods – the uniquely human character of human beings – is profoundly rooted in participation in social relationships and citizenship.(2) If one was to continue with the Aristotelian *four causes* model of analysis, *the formal cause* of human rights would include elements such as mediancy of equality, whereas the *efficient cause* of right would be law. However, it is to be underscored that *the final cause* of human rights, as for law itself, is the common good. The language of "common good" seems to be directly implicit in Aristotle's account of the importance of cities, and what it means to be fully and completely human.

It is instructive to review the definition of law that was promoted by St. Thomas, which makes explicit the Aristotelian implication of a relationship between human beings, human law, the common good and immutable ethical standards.

St. Thomas defines "law" as: "an ordinance of right reason promulgated by legitimate authority and directed to the common good."(3)

Aquinas also distinguishes four main kinds of law: the eternal, and then three additional kinds which depend in different ways on the eternal: the natural, the human, and the divine. Aquinas describes law as "a certain rule and measure of acts whereby man is induced to act or is restrained from acting."(4) Law has an inherent connection to reason, because reason is the essential reference point and measure for human actions. This connection is to both divine reason, reflected in divine law and, secondly, to human reason, when it acts in accordance with the purpose or final cause implanted in it by God.

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(1) *The Politics of Aristotle,* Translated with an Introduction, Notes and Appendices by Ernest Barker, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1946, 1252b, p. 5.

(2) Edward Clayton, *Aristotle*, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006, http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/aris-pol.htm#SH7a.

(3) Summa I-IIq. 90a. 4.

(4) *Summa Theologica*, Qu 90 esp. Article 3 in A.P. D'Entrèves, Ed. *Aquinas – Selected Political Writings*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1970, p. 109 ff.

Law is directed by its nature to the good, and especially to the universal or common good. It is addressed not primarily to private persons but to the whole people meeting in common or to persons who have charge of the community as a whole.(5) There is thus, in the thought of Aquinas, an explicit recognition of the relationship implicit in Aristotle's thought, between ethics or the universal and common good, law as its efficient cause, and citizenship or the coming together of human beings in a community founded upon reciprocal relationships.

The common good, for Aquinas, is that for which human society exists. It is not merely the sum total of individual goods, but rather qualitatively the good of society, which in turn exists to facilitate the ultimate end of the human person.

My motive in exploring these ideas is primarily a practitioner's interest in getting a perspective on the terrain of practice and public service in particular. Let us consider for a moment the relevance of the concept of the public interest within the context of the analysis that has been developed thus far.

The notion of a "public interest," which emerged in the utilitarian discourse of the nineteenth-century, is often seen as hostile to the older tradition of discourse about a common good. And there is little doubt that it was conceived, by the utilitarians themselves, as a radical departure from tradition.(6) In the mind of Bentham, the concept of utility, and the idea that the alternative courses of action available to individuals could be evaluated by means of a calculation involving the summing of their respective utilities (or net contributions to happiness) was seen as a revolution in thinking, dispensing entirely with the metaphysical heritage of Aristotle and the medievals.(7)

While I wish to argue that the originality of utilitarianism was probably overstated by its proponents, I do not wish to dismiss the importance of its impact on the public sector, and the practice of public service. The view that utility provided the appropriate basis for decision-making, and that utilities could be calculated and added together, opened the door to the belief that decision-making about public ends should emerge from a process of summing individual utilities, or interests, in order to obtain a "public interest." And this view of public decision-making, in combination with the assumption that each individual is the best judge of his or her

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(5) F.C. Copleston, *Aquinas*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1955, p. 219 ff.

(6) See, for example, the discussion in John Morrow, *History of Political Thought – A Thematic Introduction*, New York University Press, Washington Square, New York, 1998, p. 114 ff.

(7) See John Plamenatz, *Man and Society – A Critical Examination of Some Important Social and Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx*, Volume II, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1963, p. xii.

own interest, leads us directly to the model of electoral democracy that is now so central to our public life.(8) And elections are only the most dramatic manifestations of a model of public decision-making that operates continuously, in all the public polling, consultation exercises and other forms of public pulse-taking that drive decision-making in modern democratic systems.

So utilitarianism has been tremendously important. My argument, however, is that it did not really displace the linkages established in the thought of Aristotle and St. Thomas, and certainly did not alter the role of the concept of the common good as an ultimate reference point for public discourse and action. In practice, individuals considering their personal advantage, and communities attempting to determine a "public interest," are driven continuously into the realm of ethical debate; the realm of discussion about what is good, and what is not. This is because human happiness, which utilitarians saw as an ultimate reference point, cannot be detached from its consequential relationship with human virtue. The achievement of sustainable happiness, for communities as for individuals, depends upon the recognition of and adherence to ethical standards – faithfulness to the good. This, as we have seen, is one of the linkages recognized by Aristotle and St. Thomas, between virtue and happiness. And when we acknowledge that linkage, we have no option but to restore ethics to the place it occupied in the thinking of St. Thomas, at the centre of any decision about what to do or not to do, and the common good by extension, must be seen as central to any deliberation concerning a course of action to be taken by, or for, a community.

So, this brings me to the conclusion of my philosophical argument. Or, if you prefer, the threshold of my practical claim. I believe that we can only recognize the importance of public service, and indeed fully understand what it is, in the context of the central linkages implicit in the thought of Aristotle, and so effectively elucidated in that of St. Thomas.

It is my submission that to render public service is to serve both the public interest and the common good. If, as I have just argued, the "public interest" needs to be understood essentially as a process for determining the public good, rather than as a decision-making criterion entirely distinct from it, then the objective of serving the common good can be a beacon for us whether we are probing the philosophical common good or the applied political "public interest."

In either sense, public service is a profoundly ethical activity, not merely serving an immediate ethical objective but contributing to the maintenance of the community itself. If, as Aristotle claimed, we need to be citizens, or members of a community, in order to be fully

(8) This argument was made explicit in the thought of James Mill. See George Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, Third Edition, George Harrap and Co. Ltd., London, Toronto, Wellington, Sydney, 1951, p. 583 ff.

human, then public service is the activity, *par excellence*, by which we achieve our own full humanity.

These linkages lend, I believe, a valuable dimension to a claim with which we are all familiar, that public service is a noble calling. It is noble not merely in the sense that those who serve the public, in whatever capacity, sometimes forego material benefits associated with the private sector. It is noble, and ennobling, because it involves a participation in the essential human enterprise: the continuous challenge of becoming and remaining, fully human. Only by rising to this challenge, can we avoid the fatality that Aristotle recognized, and that we see documented in so many heart wrenching stories in our history books and daily news: the ever-present danger of reverting to the life of the beast that remains within us all as suggested by some of the "Social Contract" theorists.

We live in a culture that compulsively views people through the lens of their occupation – what they do for a living – and tends to conceptualize public service as an occupation. When public service is understood in the richer way that is suggested to us by the ideas we have been exploring, however, it should be clear that it is much more than an occupation, although it is undoubtedly performed by many civil servants among others.

At least thee categories of public service can be identified. First, there is representative public service which includes all those who serve the public on our municipal councils, school boards, provincial and federal legislatures as well as public office holders including members of the judiciary.

The second category of persons serving the public is that encompassing the professional civil service such as the public administrators at the municipal level, and the public servants who are in the provincial or federal public service. This group is engaged as non-partisan public administrators and might well include the professional workers in fields such as health, education and justice.

The third category of public service, in this conceptual taxonomy, includes all those who render service to the public through participation in service groups, workers groups, church and other non-governmental organizations. Here we are speaking of public service through active citizenship in civil society. This category would include, as well, individuals who undertake singular actions for the purpose of contributing to the common good, such as the famous run of Terry Fox to raise funds for the purpose of cancer research.

The unifying feature of all these occupations and activities is, of course, that they are not merely directed to the interest of the individual engaged upon them, but are contributions to the public interest and the common good. Within the framework developed in this lecture,

they can be recognized as deeply ethical activities, sustaining the existence of a community and the possibility of ethical activity, as well as contributing to the achievement of more specific objectives. The willingness of citizens to engage in public service thus becomes vitally important for any community.

It is argued that a robust public service attitude among the people of a country is critically important, among other reasons, for the success of that society's democracy. The Canadian story over the past 140 years when examined against the norm of democracy, freedom and human rights is not too bad notwithstanding serious faults along the way. One thinks of the Komagata Maru, St. Louis, Quebec Padlock, and Japanese Canadians' Internment. However, by and large, the Canadian journey has been positive, leading to the conclusion that maybe, just maybe, there must be a few things correct about our system.

A significant contributor to the success of Canada's democratic development has been the positive role played by Canadians through their engagement in public service, whether as an active member of civil society, a professional public servant or as a legislative representative.

The Public Service Commission of Canada is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. An informative current publication, which just became available in English under the title: *Defending a Contested Ideal: Merit and the Public Service Commission of Canada, 1908-2008* is by Luc Juillet and Ken Rasmussen and provides a good account of the Commission's story.(9) This work is a follow-up on the well-known work of Professor Ted Hodgetts and colleagues: *The Biography of an Institution: The Civil Service Commission of Canada 1908-1967*, which traces the emergence of the modern merit-based public service out of the patronage-ridden organization that preceded it.(10) This book documents the impact of several extraordinary individuals, including Commissioner Adam Shortt, whose efforts between 1908 and 1917 as a member of the newly created Civil Service Commission, significantly contributed to the establishment of the modern public service. Stories like these exemplify the ideal of public service, including the ethical dimension which I have been arguing is central to this ideal.

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(9) Luc Juillet and Ken Rasmussen, *Defending a Contested Ideal: Merit and the Public Service Commission, 1908-2008*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 2008.

(10) J.E. Hodgetts, William McCloskey, Reginald Whitaker and V. Seymour Wilson, *The Biography of an Institution – The Civil Service Commission of Canada, 1908-1967*, The Institute of Public Administration of Canada and McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and London, 1972.

In my opinion, part of the explanation for the success achieved over the years by the Public Service Commission of Canada and its equivalents in the provinces across Canada is that they have been able to attract bright and highly motivated citizens to pursue a career in the field of public administration. One attracting element was the fundamental role played by the "merit principle" across the civil service in Canada.

> Over the years, and still today, as we attempt to ensure competent and efficient management of public resources, provide equality of opportunities in public employment, and ensure a proper balance between preventing patronage and ensuring the public service's responsiveness to elected officials, the principle of merit remains a key part of our debates on the future of the public service.(11)

While there have been those over the past who felt that the professional public service did not respect the merit principle, there is little evidence that such a perception was a significant factor in causing some Canadians to turn away from a career in a given civil service, whether municipal, provincial or federal. Indeed, as we see in the example of Adam Shortt, deficiencies in the application of the merit principle are not so much a deterrent as a call to action for the true public servant, a call to redouble the efforts to remedy any ethical deficiency.

If one were to canvass the question of whether or not there has been a diminishing of interest in or participation in public service in all three categories of fields, one might look at the state of social capital, social connectedness or social cohesion. This is because these concepts re-express, in current social science language, a conception of community and the linkages that are critical to its health, that is traceable to Aristotle and St. Thomas.

The Senate of Canada's Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology examined the issue of social cohesion and published its 1999 report entitled: "Final Report on Social Cohesion."(12) This report – the third released by the Committee in the course of its two year study of the impact of globalization and technology on social cohesion in Canada – provides an extensive exploration of the interrelationship between society and economy, and argues fundamentally that economic progress cannot be sustained if its social prerequisites are allowed to erode as a result of the pressures of globalization and technological change. The term "social cohesion" in this argument refers to these social prerequisites or, in the

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(11) Op cit. p. vii.

(12) Senate of Canada, Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, *Final Report: On Social Cohesion*, June 1999.

words of the distinctively Canadian definition included in the report: "… the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunities within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among Canadians."[13]

Of central relevance to our themes here this evening, the Committee study found that social cohesion can never be taken-for-granted, even in a country such as Canada, with its deep historical roots. The health of communities, as communities, is continuously affected by the entire universe of economic, social and political influences, and in our time is subject to a range of new pressures linked to globalization and technological change.

From the perspective of our concerns here this evening, dimensions of this challenge that were not explored in the Committee report are more clearly discernible. The implications of the challenge extends far beyond our future material prosperity. It also potentially affects the commitment to public service and the possibility of ethical action itself, via the linkages that we have already explored. For this reason, one cannot overstate the importance of the Committee's call for effective policy responses to globalization and technological change.

Professor Robert Putnam, of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, provided another early expression of concern about the current state of social cohesion and social connectedness, and its implications for a robust public service attitude. In his year 2000 widely circulated book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam develops a number of important insights.[14] For example, he argues that television has had a negative impact on public service in the community involvement sense. He says that:

> It is precisely those Americans most marked by this dependence on televised entertainment who were most likely to have dropped out of civic and social life.[15]

It is noteworthy that Putnam concluded his study on "Technology and the Mass Media" without deciding whether television was the cause of this marked detachment or the result of a previous step away from the public square. Putnam recognizes that distinguishing between causes and consequences in the realm of all human affairs is enormously complex, which serves to underline the difficulty of the policy challenges associated with these problems.

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(13) Ibid., p. 6.

(14) Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone – The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Singapore, 2000.

(15) Ibid., p. 246.

A further interesting observation of Putnam is that "civic skills" can be learned in the church environment. Putnam writes:

> Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America.[16]

I wonder if the same could be posited for those of us who study together in the academic community. A final consideration from Professor Putnam's work is that dealing with ethnic diversity. In his work "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century," Putnam reports on his research in forty-one metropolitan areas in the US that "in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods residents of all races tend to 'hunker down.' Trust (even in one's own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer."[17]

It would really require a separate lecture to do Putnam's thought full justice. It provides a comprehensive examination of the challenges of social cohesion in modern societies, including (as just noted) trust issues that seem to arise within groups because of the proximity of others. But Putnam is equally comprehensive in his attention to policy solutions, including the central importance of civic education, and the diversity of sources (including religious institutions) that can be effective in providing it.

I would like to draw your attention to an important contribution made by the Jesuit David Hollenbach in "The Common Good and Christian Ethics" who in 2002 provided a thoughtful analysis of the common good in relation to the globalized world of today where people must move towards new forms of solidarity if they are to live good lives together.

I have already spoken about one Senate Committee study that is relevant to our themes this evening, but I cannot neglect to mention at least one additional study. I can hardly claim to be without bias about this second one, since I had the privilege to be Acting Chairman of the committee that produced it, back in 1993.

The study completed by the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology argued that the essential character of Canadian citizenship cannot be reduced to a single identity, but rather is found in the fact that Canada enables people to identify with their country from different perspectives and with different emphases on what is most

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(16) Ibid., p. 66.

(17) Robert D. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century," The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2007, p. 137.

valued.[18] Of particular relevance to the analysis developed in this lecture, the Report argues that citizenship entails a commitment to a wider realm beyond that of self-interest, with associated responsibilities. Citizenship education was affirmed to be of central importance in providing all members of the community with the information, motivation and skills that are needed for full participation, and the Committee called on the federal government to work with the provinces in order to address a situation of widespread neglect.

In the light of concerns about social cohesion that were to arise in the decade following the 1993 Report, and the themes that have been preoccupying us this evening, the insights of the Social Affairs, Science and Technology Committee fifteen years ago remain amazingly timely. We can only hope that, reinforced by developments in Canada during the intervening years, they become a prelude to more effective action.

Citizenship education may well be the "conditio sine qua non" of a robust public service attitude. Its importance in addressing social cohesion, social connectedness, identity and democracy is recognized by a number of contemporary policy specialists.

Professor Alan Sears of the University of New Brunswick, for example, has observed that effective Canadian citizenship education in the Canada of the 21st century goes in the direction of generic citizenship education. That is, an approach that gives focus to rights, social justice and participation rather than on a particular Canadian vision of democracy and citizenship.

> The emphasis in the latter model is on a blend of what Kiwan calls "moral," "legal," and "participatory" conceptions of citizenship education with the focus on preparing young people to engage in civic activity in a range of ways from volunteering and community service through more formal political actions such as voting, campaigning or running for office.[19]

It is interesting that the approach to citizenship education advocated by Professor Sears is, in important respects, reflective of the conception of citizenship developed in the Senate Report of 15 years ago. And the inclusive understanding of participation expressed in the

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(18) Senate of Canada, Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, *Canadian Citizenship: Sharing the Responsibility*, Ottawa, 1993.

(19) Alan Sears, "From Britishness to Nothingness and Back Again: Looking for a Way Forward in Citizenship Education," June 2008.

quotation I have just shared is aligned with the equally inclusive conception of public service that I am suggesting.

In the argument that I am advancing, ethics grounded in reason, and expressed in the conception of the public good, is the central focus of public service. Before concluding, I would like to suggest that the language of the Government of Canada's current Public Service Code of Values and Ethics is congruent with this view, and provides an excellent source of practical guidance to public servants, both those working for the federal government and those in the other categories of public service.(20)

Reflecting its immediate practical purposes, the Code devotes significant attention to the elaboration of a conflict of interest regime, and post-employment behaviour requirements. However, in its section on public service values, it includes ethical values along with three other categories (democratic, professional and people values). The ethical values include a direct affirmation of the duty to make decisions in the public interest, and to ensure that the public interest prevails over the private interests of any public servant. The other categories provide additional emphasis on the importance of ethical public service, including the need to help ministers, under the law, to serve the public interest; and the need to respect human dignity and the value of every person in exercising public service authorities.

At the beginning of this lecture, I indicated that the linkages among the common good, its pursuit through public service, and the social foundations of ethics would provide a philosophical framework for exploring the character, central meaning and vital importance of public service.

As discussion has proceeded through the series of conceptual and practical issues considered this evening, I have tried to underline a central theme. Public service is a noble, and a profoundly ennobling activity, and as Aristotle and St. Thomas recognized so long ago, its ethical dimension is the key to the enormous satisfaction that public service can provide to those who commit themselves to it.

In Canada, we are supremely fortunate to have benefited from the work of so many who have made the commitment to public service, over the long history of our community and its development. I am confident that this will continue. I would like to conclude, with the experiences I have been fortunate to have in my own life very much in mind, by urging all who

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(20) Government of Canada, *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Service*, Canadian Government Publishing, Ottawa, 2003, available online at: http://www.psagency-agencefp.gc.ca/pol/vec-cve-eng.asp.

are here tonight to enrich your lives, and enrich our common life by, in your individual ways, taking up the challenge of public service. You will never regret it.