

Diversity and Migration and Global Policy
Closing Remarks for the 10th Annual Metropolis Conference
October 2005

I want to thank the sponsors of this conference; The Department of Immigration and the City of Toronto. As official commentator of the conference, let me share some reflections on the last three days.

The discourse has been full of strategies, enthusiasms, and trepidations. Hope sometimes cringes behind the cold terms of policy, perhaps because our terms are estranged from the heart. The principals of thought that originally inspired can become the abstractions of governance. The metaphors of the mechanistic – “levers”, “scales”, “indices” can cloud the words that inspire human action. Understanding is often as simple as the language people use with each other. If we inspire the human condition in words that honor it, people may cease to look like “social capital”, and look like people again. I doubt that such restitution is merely the business of poetry.

I have been moved by the prevalence of concern about human dignity, in our discussions, especially in our economic seminars.

We have spoken of human rights, the global fever for security, the understanding that migration can be a life-risking affair---these concerns speak of a real concern for the quality of life, and not just the quantification of it. The delegates here have resisted mere quantification at a philosophical level.

Indeed, philosophy is what is lacking in global discussions. By that I mean sound premises and wise conclusions, for the common good. The impulse towards the good is various. But what must not be denied is a plain understanding of human psychology, or, rather, the human heart. We must ask what this heart wants, what it aspires to, besides a better material life, beyond the provenance of market economies.

“Commonality” is what we have to build in the house of diversity. To figure out what we have in common, beyond religion, culture, and conventional ideology; this is the urgent matter of the times. Negotiations, bartering, and translation depend on core values; we must be sure that people want the same things; if they don't, we are in real trouble.

We expect people want the same things, or we wouldn't be here. Toronto is, for the moment, a successful multi-cultural city. We could explain this as a fortuitous circumstance of time, geography and history. This could change tomorrow, in the event of a terrorist attack. The global city is at the mercy of the haphazard. But some cities have thicker skin than others. They have a character of civic grace, a resource that helps them withstand the uncivil. Then again, strategies must not blind us to the natural wisdom of the civic. I have noticed, in this or any city, that when people get along with each other, it's because they have jumped to universals. They have the sense to know that, left to language, customs, cultural and politics, they would be at each other in no time.

People have the innate wisdom, even in crisis, to exercise, by an arbitrary act of will, that which is life-affirming; they can choose to encounter with welcome, or hostility, smile or suspicion, protocol or spontaneity, courage or fear. Policy tries to create the ambience in which the best choices are made. But it's best not to forget the good sense of the human spirit; it knows when it is moving towards or away from life, towards communality, or isolation, towards self-interest or civic concern. We are brought up in an age that says people must be taught these things. Marvelously we have all seen instances where that is not the case. Something in the spirit educates itself and acts accordingly, independent of the machinations of utopian concern.

Not to say that everything will take care of itself. But we are beholden to a grace that bails us out, where all strategy seems to have failed. This must be a great relief to all but the messianic.

That said, we are responsible for bad strategy. I have heard it said at this conference that a barrier free workplace is a strategic imperative and not a moral imperative. We must quarantine such ideas. The ethical discussion must never be removed from the pragmatic one. If there is a gulf between praxis and ethic, we will fall into it. At the very least, our plans for the future will remain divided. And there is no time for division.

There are paradoxes in our discussion. We talk about competitive economies when we know that economies are predicated by the qualitative. The creative agenda bears another paradox. We suppose that the creative person will be a happy and productive person. But this again leaves out the premise of trust. You can't have a creative citizenry without a trusting citizenry. And that, again is done by commonalities; when people are not isolated in their beliefs, they work together towards the creative, the fiscal and the visionary.

The task philosophically, is to arrive at trans-cultural beliefs; a daunting task-- and naggingly qualified by cultural rights and tribal entitlements. Until we have an identifiable self as global citizens, cities will remain the provinces of the multi-nationals, nations will be foreign to each other, borders will define our paranoia.

Very naturally, conferences on diversity end up being deferential to the insoluble-- the honoring of everyone's rights. Might it not be helpful to question the premise behind diversity; that premise is that different peoples have different aspirations. I suggest to you that behind the costumes, the politics, the agendas, the nationalities, the lifestyles, the fiscal chasms, there is a hope for the universal; and the task of governance is to forge an alphabet for the universal. This task was once left to religion, culture, family and tribe. In a globalized world, that task now falls to governance.

If we want something between the excesses of idealism and the pragmatics of demography let us subscribe to the insight of Marta Suplicy, the mayor of Sao Paulo who said the other day; "the reason people come to a city is hope'.

The proper job of policy and governance is not to vulgarize that hope, either with market solutions or cosmetic agendas.

And finally let me suggest that the physical project of the city of diversity is not accomplished without a metaphysical project or, to put it plainly, a spiritual project. If the religious agenda is difficult and nonnegotiable, let us have the good sense to provide the coherences of what Alan Broadbent call “soul”. Perhaps, in such universal terms we might find international allegiances.

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