

In Memoriam: Hugh Segal and Progressive Conservatism

On September 19, 2023, family, friends, and colleagues of Hugh Segal gathered at Massey College to celebrate his life and contributions to Canadian society. The former principal of Massey College was a beloved figure in Canadian political and intellectual circles: Jean Charest, the former Premier of Quebec, who gave the keynote at the gathering, made this point well by quoting Paul Martin, the former Prime Minister of Canada who had said “I don’t know anyone who didn’t like Hugh Segal. I wouldn’t want to know anyone who didn’t like Hugh Segal.”

Charest, too, captured what made Segal so special to Canadian public life: he was both a man of ideas and intense political/partisan engagement. Author of a score of books, the last being *Bootstraps Need Boots*, a plea for a Guaranteed Annual Income to reduce poverty, President of The Institute for Research on Public Policy, long-time lecturer at Queens University and recently retired as Principal of Massey College, Segal relished ideas and the research required to assess whether the ideas had merit. In 2016, for example, Segal convened an all-day roundtable at Massey College to define the criteria and contours of an Ontario pilot program to test the feasibility and potential impact of a Guaranteed Annual Income. (It was attended by Keith Banting, research director of the Macdonald Royal Commission which had recommended the idea in 1985, and Carolyn Tuohy, health expert and former Provost at the University of Toronto, who both of whom spoke about Segal’s love of ideas at the 2023 Massey memorial event.) The 2016 roundtable contributed to the Segal-authored discussion paper, *Finding a Better Way*, which laid out a blueprint for a Guaranteed Income pilot.

In 2017, the Ontario Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne launched the pilot program in the three sites of Hamilton, Thunder Bay, and Lindsay, paying a monthly stipend of \$1,300 to recipients. Ideas and research, however, are not enough to bring about policy change. In 2018, the newly-elected Doug Ford government formed by the party Segal supported all his life, cancelled the pilot after only a year. The Conservatism that Segal had advocated since he was a boy writing letters to John Diefenbaker had undergone a sea change. This theme formed a backdrop for many of the speakers at the Segal Appreciation gathering; they lamented not only the loss of a man but also the decline of Progressive Conservatism, the political construct that best defined Hugh Segal’s political career.

Hugh Segal was a joyful partisan: Steve Paikin, prominent TVO journalist, wrote a tribute in August 2023 recalling an interview where Segal was asked why it was important for

Conservatives to win elections. “Two reasons,” Segal laughingly replied. “First, our Tory values and politics are better. Second, every time we prevent Liberals from governing and cocking things up, it’s better for the province and country.”

At the Massey appreciation, Jean Charest, William Fox, and Charles Macmillan spoke about Segal’s political career—twice running for a seat in parliament, Chief of Staff to William Davis and Brian Mulroney, and candidate for Leader of the Progressive Conservative party. As the anecdotes rolled out, it became evident that Segal came to his political maturity in the Golden Age of Progressive Conservatism. His political hero John Diefenbaker won a national election by promising much greater increases to the Old Age Pension than the governing Liberals. (In the 1950s-60s Liberals had to guard their left flank not only from the CCF/NDP but also from the Conservatives.) Premiers like Robert Stanfield, Duff Roblin, William Davis, and Peter Lougheed led superior and successful provincial governments. Brian Mulroney won back-to-back majority governments which achieved free trade with the United States, began restoring national finances by introducing the Goods and Services Tax, made environmental protection a priority by concluding an agreement with the United States on acid rain, and in foreign policy, led the Commonwealth in opposing South Africa’s apartheid when Margaret Thatcher would not budge.

Progressive Conservatism believed in moderation, compromise, the rule of law and making institutions work. William Fox told the Massey audience that “Hugh’s starting premise in any policy or political discussion was that there was a role for government in our lives—in his words” To provide the infrastructure” that ensures genuine opportunity of outcomes”. Jean Charest based his keynote on Hugh Segal’s book, *The Right Balance*, in which Segal advised his fellow Conservatives that “Excessive partisanship, on a consistent basis, is not a helpful contribution.”

Janice Stein, who went to school with Hugh in Montreal, told the audience that the key to Hugh’s approach both to life and to his politics is that “he refused to be bitter.” He knew what it was like to be poor. In his book, *Bootstraps Need Boots*, Segal recalls that at times the bailiff came to repossess the family furniture and car—and he knew what it was like to be excluded. Part of a working-class Jewish family, the Segals were neither part of the French-Canadian majority nor welcomed by the Anglo elite who did their best to restrict Jewish students from entering institutions like McGill university. Hugh made civility and humour his trademark. He quipped that appointment to the Senate was “taskless thanks,” but behind the civility, was a steely purpose to make the Conservative party a big tent where the once excluded would be included.

Another consistent theme of the Progressive Conservative approach to public policy was a commitment to an activist foreign policy based on real sinews of military power. In his book, *Two Freedoms*, Segal made a point that he never tired of reiterating that ‘we simply do not have enough capacity...the percentage of our expenditures and population engaged in deployability is among the tiniest’ of the countries in NATO. Ann Fitz-Gerald, Mel Cappe and Captain (Navy) Wade Carter ensured that Hugh Segal’s commitments to foreign policy and defence received as much emphasis during the day as party politics and social policy.

Ann Fitz-Gerald, director of the Balsillie School, assessed that “the risk spectrum is changing” and certainly not for the better. By invading Ukraine Russia is challenging the post-war order. Supporting Ukraine is a core Canadian interest and, until recently, one that has enjoyed multi party support. Under Brian Mulroney, Canada was the first country in the world to recognize the independence of Ukraine in 1991. Prime Minister Harper bluntly told Vladimir Putin to “get out of Ukraine” at a G-20 meeting in 2014, and then correctly forecast that Russia’s aggression against Crimea would be followed by other territorial designs. Yet, two years after Russia’s 2022 invasion, 25% of Canadian voters now agree, according to an Angus Reid Institute survey, that Canada has offered “too much support to Ukraine.” This sentiment is driven by Conservative party supporters: the number of 2021 CPC supporters who feel Canada has offered too much support has doubled from May 2022 to now from 19% to 43%.

Hugh Segal was a particular supporter of the Royal Canadian Navy: he was named an honorary Captain in 2004 and was also the Honorary Chair of the Navy League of Canada. Captain Wade Carter referenced two important studies about how the Canadian Navy could respond to the dangerous risk spectrum that Professor Fitz-Gerald had outlined: *Oceans and Great Power Competition* (May 2023) and the *Arctic and Northern Strategic Framework* (with the Arctic now designated as a theatre of operations). At the 2023 Massey gathering, there was a wide consensus that the Arctic should be a critical priority. Jean Charest’s platform for his Conservative party leadership run in 2022, for example, pledged that Canada would meet the 2% NATO funding target, in part by much greater expenditure in Northern Canada, including the construction of two military bases.

Jean Charest, in his eloquent keynote, lauded Hugh Segal as a leader of “compassionate Canadian Conservatism” with Progressive Conservatism not opposed to modernity but only to some of its excesses. Canadian conservatism, he argued, was not a derivative of American conservatism but was a home-grown product of our history and geography. But while the Massey audience certainly enjoyed hearing again the Progressive Conservative hits of yesterday, there was recognition that there was a new beat that was exciting the Conservative faithful and, perhaps, Canadians more generally too, The Conservative party

in September 2022 had held a leadership convention. Pierre Poilievre, running on an anti-elitist populist platform of “freedom,” won 68.15% of the 417,987 votes cast by Conservative party members on the first ballot. Leslyn Lewis, running on a conservative social platform won 9.68% of the vote. Jean Charest won only 16.07% the vote. Nearly 80% of Conservative party members supported candidates very different from the Hugh Segal-Jean Charest tradition of Progressive Conservatism. But ever the optimist, if Hugh Segal was still with us, he would be rolling up his sleeves to try to persuade the Poilievre Conservatives to broaden the base and tone down the rhetoric. “The people are never wrong,” John Ibbitson of the Globe and Mail recalls Segal saying in an interview after a painful defeat. “Occasionally, they’re excessive, but never wrong.”

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