

Democracy Against The Family

William Gairdner

An Address to The World Congress of Families II

Geneva, Switzerland, November 17, 1999

A short summary of my remarks would be to say that in a faith civilization, the State plays a supportive role because the Family is a sacramental institution, but in a secular civilization such as ours, especially when it rests on a radical democratic political creed, the State and the Family inevitably become competitors for the allegiance of citizens, and in this sense they are enemies.

Many people find this conclusion upsetting because they so firmly support the family as well as democracy.

Perhaps the problem begins with the alienation of modern man, for which much blame has been placed on such things as capitalism and the factory system, the death of God, and the morally distressing work of such as Darwin, Freud, or Sartre - and many others. Neither can we overlook the influence of the Protestant Reformation that so angrily repudiated all mediation as it insisted on the primacy of a personal relationship with God. But what is seldom recognized is the dissolving effect on society of our *democratic language of rights*, and the tendency of this language to atomize society. That is, to break it down by transforming important social groups into a mass of merely political constituents we can think of as autonomous Individuals.

This is not an original view, of course, (although I do want to offer fresh insights on the actual process of this breakdown). A long line of conservative writers, from Edmund Burke, to Sir Henry Maine, to the late Robert Nisbet believed that whether ancient or modern, states, empires and nations that seek to consolidate and grow their power do so largely through the process of dissolving, regulating, or outlawing the traditional powers and rights of the voluntary groups that constitute civil society. Their objective, sometimes explicit as in the case of totalitarian systems, and subtly implicit in the softer forms of political rule under which we live, is to arrive at a single society, or "family" of citizens by ending, or at the least, by neutralizing all conflicts of moral authority beneath the level of the State. It is the old problem of *Imperium in Imperio*, or how to reconcile conflicting sources of authority in the same jurisdiction.

The easiest way to understand this process is first to think of the ultimate distinctions in the socio-political order of a free people as having less to do with degrees of *freedom* than with types and degrees of *control*. The reality we live within can then be understood as a threefold one with the State at the top, Society, or "civil society" in the middle, and the Individual at the bottom.

1) First, there is *The State*: which relies on *formal* and involuntary coercive control via its monopoly on force (exercised through laws, police, courts, jails, weapons). All moderns are citizens of coercive political states when born, whether they wish it or not. From this there is no

escape, or stateless State.

2) Second, we have *Civil Society*: which is made up of countless groups, or associations the key feature of which is *informal* voluntary control and moral persuasion (from parents, employers, clergy, officers of organizations, etc.). We are members by birth of some of these civil associations (or “intermediate associations” as they are sometimes called), such as the family, and our religious group. But at a certain point we are free to leave them - at a price.

Accordingly, we cannot be forced to join any civil association - although we can be forced to leave by law for some wrongdoing or misconduct, or driven out by moral means. But other than for a criminal offense, in which case the power of the State is called upon, coercion is never a part of the voluntary associations of civil society.

This is what creates the central moral distinction between the *authority* we accept or refuse, and *power*, which controls us whether we accept it or not. I take it as given and evident from history that without effective checks and balances, power will always seek to replace authority and if unchecked, will eventually and naturally spread to control everyone and everything it can.

3) Third, there are millions of *Individuals*: who rely on *personal* control (historically, this is the milieu for religion, dualism, and the inner dialogue of freedom of, or slavery to oneself)

These three terms imply that civil society is somehow secondary, or sandwiched between, or dependent upon individuals below, and the State above, for its existence.

But I argue otherwise: the primary reality of human existence is a morally bonding civil society that gives birth to new individuals, who must then be nourished and raised up to take their place in that society. Ideally the State, which is a creature, if not a creation of civil society, ought to answer to society, and not vice versa, though we know this is rarely, if ever the case. In practice, although society is always antecedent to the State brought into being for its protection, we inevitably, and quite falsely see the State positioned and empowered as the primary institution.

So my answer to the question, Which claims Priority, Family or State?, is a conservative one: Family, and the community in which it is embedded *ought* to claim priority over both the State *and* the Individual with respect to the needs of society, and especially with respect to the needs of children, which is to say, to its own survival.

But the key moral distinction here is between *voluntary authority*, and *coercive power*, the first of which requires consent, and the second, surrender. Society demands we act as moral *agents*, the State demands only that we act as political *objects*. The recent course of Western political history, in a fluctuation that began with the radical democrats of the French Revolution, has been the aggressive attempt, overtly by totalitarian States, covertly by democratic ones, to dissolve the multifarious authorities of civil society through the bureaucratic supply of our wants

and needs promised not as social, but as individual rights, thus to convert us from moral agents and subjects in community, to materially-contented autonomous political objects.

As many have pointed out, this process of atomization is a work of social disorganization, an intentional disassembling of traditional society in order to so weaken it that rootless individuals necessarily become exposed to the appealing order of rational state power as their only remaining community. True conservatives (I use the terms “conservative” and “liberal” here in their historical, and not party sense) have always resisted this movement by preference for the traditional bonds of a free society and the natural obligations of moral life. They give priority to Society over the Individual, rather than vice versa. This is a key distinction from the true liberal from any age, who would tend to make the claims of the Individual prior to everything. This is what Canada’s Chief Justice, the Honourable Antonio Lamer surely meant when he held forth, rather inelegantly, during a newspaper interview in 1992, saying: *“You know I don’t think society is an end in itself. I think a person is the most important thing. Anything else is there to assist the person to fulfill one’s [sic] life ... everything else is subordinate. Even collectivities.”*

The true liberal wishes to replace traditional society with a network of contractual relationships continuously amenable to the human will of the moment, while the conservative prefers the ordering traditions, obligations and authority of established society and a life within a settled community over time. This difference in the temporality of the democratic instinct has not been sufficiently stressed. The liberal wants his freedom, even his communal freedom, to be as present, and his obligations to be as revocable, as possible, on the grounds that the immediacy and revocability of any choice are the signs of its authenticity. The conservative, in contrast, takes the longer temporal view, concentrating on the binding nature of our obligations, even if our freedom is limited by them. That is why Chesterton spoke of “the democracy of the dead,” to mean that the people is the whole civilization and moral tradition in which we are embedded, and not merely the heated gathering of the moment, it is why Burke defined society as a compact, between the living, the dead, and those yet to be born.

In the battle to defend this distinction, conservatives have lost badly, for what is clearly evident in the history of modern democracy is a prolonged and growing attack on civil society by those pushing for an ever more egalitarian welfare state, and this process is continued today even at the international level, where the language of democracy is being used aggressively not only to dissolve traditional society within nation states, but even to dissolve the traditional rights of nation states themselves.

A single example will do: in 1994 the process of disempowering the traditional rights of the family through the logic of democracy was manifest internationally in something the United Nations called “Year of the Family,” during which that organization had the gall to proclaim as its slogan that the family is “the smallest democracy at the heart of society.” Now this is pure

bureaucratic hype and drivel, because the family has never been a democracy, nor should it be. I do not mean we should not teach children democratic ideas or values within the family. But that the family itself ought to operate as a democracy is plainly idiotic. Just try to imagine a family with three or more children holding a vote on whether the children should attend school, or obey moral standards, or be allowed to burp at the table, or even more perverse, whether Mom and Dad should have pocket money! Yet here was a bizarre trumpet call from on high for the enforcement of the democratic “rights”, “choice” and “freedom” of children. Against what? ... Against the family authority of their own parents.

And this goes on. On November 19, 1999, most public schools in Canada held a U.N.-sponsored day for all students to vote on their favorite “children’s rights,” presented guilefully to them as democratic rights. Canada’s Chief Elections Officer John-Pierre Kingsley promised that “This historic experience will be a valuable lesson in democracy for the young Canadians who participate.” But does the “right” to information mean they can consume pornography? Or Internet hate information? Does “free association” mean a 14 year old daughter can have sex when she wishes? Does a right to medical care mean the right to an abortion without her parents’ knowledge? Does a child’s right to “rest and leisure” mean no family chores anymore?

I submit that these international democrats are well aware that children are too young to pursue comprehensive rights. What the U.N. hopes for, intoxicated with its Rousseauvian faith in the spark of natural goodness in all children, is more “autonomy” of children. But this can only mean the enforcement of children’s rights as interpreted and supervised by officials - usually against parents. Indeed, the ordinary undemocratized natural family is regularly described in journals that uphold such conventions as “authoritarian,” and whenever attacked by homosexual or feminist advocates, as “privileged.” Remember: this is not an international program to cure manifest evils such as smallpox, hunger, or war. Rather, it is a *call to become liberated* even from the healthiest of natural family-based societies, *in the name of a higher democratic freedom and equality*. We are having great difficulty fighting against these intrusions because they are carried out in *a language of democracy* that is our only political and moral language now, and we have not yet developed a higher pro-family moral language to fight back. In this environment, to defend the traditional family is often to be accused of the worst of modern sins: someone who is “anti-democratic.”

This tells us we are in the presence of a political creed, or religion that has reached an advanced stage of ideological and moral confusion. As an example, I personally sat at a political meeting addressed by a UN defender of its ostensibly pro-family initiative and asked her for a definition of the family. She trotted out the idea that the Family was any group of people who associate with each other, live together, work together, care for or support each other, and so on. So I asked her if the politicians assembled in the room would qualify? She paused for a second or two, as if thinking deeply, then declared that yes, indeed, they could be called “a family.”

All this suggests the existence of an insufficiently acknowledged and very serious dilemma; namely, that modernity is characterized by *anti-egalitarian societies trapped within egalitarian States*, the two realities pitched against each other in a kind of battle to the death for allegiance of the people. Or rather, a battle to decay, since although society is by far the more compelling and gratifying, it is also by far the weaker. I stress that this is a problem of modern radical democracy, and not of democracy in its original organic form which was by and large expected to express the will of the traditional, and certainly God-fearing societies in which it took root.

Now we must examine more closely the actual microprocess of human social bonding that, whenever it is engulfed by an ideology of radical egalitarian democracy, will always generate a debilitating civil war of values such as we are now experiencing.

In order to pass from the status of Individual to membership in any voluntary association of human beings, whether we are speaking of the Boy Scouts, a marriage, a corporation, a charitable group, or any other voluntary organization, there will generally be found (in a weak or strong form) a kind of solemn rite of passage, or process, the four elements of which are *sacrifice, subordination, commitment, and privilege*.

Sacrifice refers to the *moral* requirement that individuals aspiring to join a social group must voluntarily agree to *place the common will of the group above personal needs*. Sacrifice is the most spiritual of the four features because it demands a suppression of self. From this flows loyalty. The motto of common organizations like Rotary International, for example, is "Service Above Self." If this willingness to sacrifice for others is intentionally betrayed, a member will usually be forced out.

Subordination refers to the *legal* requirement that to enable group discipline all members must *submit to the authority and rules of the group*, without which the hierarchy of organization is impossible. Members carry around an understanding, verbal or written of the rules by which they feel bound and by which they proudly distinguish themselves from non-members. Refusal to adhere to the rules and expectations of the group will get members shunned, disciplined, or expelled.

Commitment is the *public* process whereby, the first two requirements having been met, a member is asked formally to make a vow, or *commitment to the group*, normally in by way of an oath, written contract, or deed, to the ideals and activities they share. Autonomous individuals who decline this process will never be coerced to do so - membership is entirely voluntary - but neither will they get to the last stage. In fact, they will be visibly and intentionally excluded as outsiders. I submit that the moment the *insider/outsider* distinction is made official is also the

moment of community formation, and without it community cannot be formed. This is a profoundly anti-democratic moment with respect to outsiders.

Privilege is the *social and political reward* stage whereby the group approves *the bestowal of specific benefits and protections on qualified members only*. This is often accompanied by some kind of signifying ceremony in which the commitment or vow of loyalty is made, and by special symbols, or costume intended to distinguish members from non-members. Sworn or signed-up members of millions of organizations are expected to be loyal, perhaps carry a membership card, or dress a certain way, to be dutiful, pay dues, and do any required work, abide by rules, treat fellow members appropriately, and so on. Most important, marital partners sign covenants, wear rings, get lawful and exclusive sexual access to each other, and in a procreative society qualify, along with their children for certain legal, tax and social privileges until very recently only available to married heterosexuals.

By now the problem with respect to democracy is quite apparent: social groups are defined by their eagerness to *distinguish*, in a very positive sense between members and non-members, insiders and outsiders. All of civil society, we might say, is a vast organism that hovers over the great undifferentiated mass of autonomous individuals, seeking to lure them into making sacrifices and commitments to its own far more challenging and difficult life. By this four-step process, society seeks not only to *select*, but to *direct, its members to specific higher ends*. As long as individuals demonstrate a clear willingness *to graduate from individual autonomy to social interdependence*, then through its preferential treatment, society breathes the warmth of belonging into their souls. Then, and only then, will positive benefits, status, and protection conferred on those who voluntarily opt into its preferred - and far more difficult, even sacrificial - social forms.

Importantly, however, Society generally has no wish to harm those who refuse to opt in. It merely waits for them. Their basic freedoms and rights *as individuals* remain intact. They should not get less than the common rights and freedoms of all individuals. But, until very recently, they certainly could not get more unless they opted into this higher social process, thereby signaling their *willingness to sacrifice for the whole*. In the case of the natural family, this sacrifice is lifelong and considerable in terms of devotion of time and resources to those other than oneself, and prior to the modern rage for the democratic religion no one had ever questioned the need to protect and privilege this demanding institution above all others.

In short, the community-creating process described here is natural, preferential, and intentionally exclusionary, and *the modern democratic project is to weaken, circumvent, or destroy it*. Now I do not suggest this is the explicit intent of all democrats, many of whom lament the social and family breakdown they see before them. But with the exception of radical

egalitarians who do indeed openly welcome this breakdown, I think it is a good description of how the logic of the modern democratic state works as a battering ram to destroy society.

Interestingly, it does this not by *removing* exclusive privileges, but by *granting them to everyone equally*, and in this manner it removes formerly powerful distinctions such as between the married and the unmarried, the heterosexual and the homosexual, or the rights of countless formerly protected social groups versus the rights of mere individuals. The creation of so-called “domestic partnerships” is just one example of how the State, without removing any of the legal and economic privileges of Society’s most fundamental social group, removes the *exclusivity and status* of those privileges by including everyone, thus converting a policy intended to persuade autonomous individuals to accept the social sacrifice of marriage and family into a non-discriminatory instrument of general welfare that removes concrete rewards for the sacrifice of self-interest in the name of our most important social institution. The radical language of democracy at work in this process is evident in our daily newspapers if we care to see it. For example, a **Globe and Mail** article (November 25, 1999) describes how an incensed lawyer will now take Canada’s recent “domestic partnership” ruling - one that already ends the distinction between married and unmarried “spouses” - to the Supreme Court of Canada on the grounds that it “discriminates” by creating a “sexual apartheid”... because it does not eliminate *all* distinctions between family types. One of the central messages, the lawyer argued, is that “*privileging* heterosexual relationships is contrary to the *equality* guarantees [of our Charter] and thus unconstitutional.” I have emphasized the two key opposing terms in this nasty monologue.

What this means is that in the name of democracy the State steals its customers from the living society, hoping for a dead society and a living State. But this is a moral contradiction, since society is based on voluntary authority (it is morally alive), and the State on involuntary power (it is morally dead). I do not mean to say that governments may not do some good things - though I believe that they generally serve themselves and generate many pernicious, if unintended consequences. But the State as an institution cannot in the end generate a lasting moral loyalty because it has absolute power over us. In the same way, although we may like and respect them very much, we cannot have a genuine friendship with an employee, over whom we have economic power. These are non-reciprocal relationships.

At any rate, I mean to argue that states that begin as organic democratic entities seem slowly to transform themselves into radical ones, consuming their own societies and families in a suicidal civil war of values that pitches individual rights against society's rights. Modern written charters and constitutional gerrymandering are now the central weapon in this radical war against all positive social discrimination and privilege.

This process of social breakdown is particularly well advanced in North America, where a huge variety of codes and charters created by every conceivable level of government are being

used aggressively by courts, tribunals, and radical interest groups to claim individual rights through the use of a hyperdemocratic language and a kind of top-down, as well as lateral absolutism. Which is to say they cleverly circumvent the *real* democratic process because they are deeply wary of the traditional morals of the majority, and instead seek to win through an ideological attack on society from the top and from the side. Whether for family, tax, or legal privileges and immunities, spousal benefits, private property rights of landlords or owners, or commercial rights of enterprises, or access to formerly private groups - it matters not. Wherever enough angry individuals can be found who want the social benefits, privileges and protections of a particular social group or class, *without having to pay the stipulated price* of personal sacrifice, subordination, or commitment, they have discovered or invented codes and charters to argue that they are being wrongfully excluded from some privilege - and therefore the State is not fulfilling its democratic mandate.

So to conclude, I argue that other than keeping the State in its place through massive tax revolts, which have the virtue of starving ideology, if not changing it, our only recourse is *to change the language of democracy* by imposing on it a *higher language* of societal rights and priority. This means repudiating the centralizing, egalitarian language of radical democracy in order to revive *the freedom and authority of the Family and the many other voluntary associations of civil society*. It means a public de-emphasis on individual moral autonomy as a democratic right for the good reason that it operates mostly as a cover for more incursions of State power. I am imagining that such a language will respond to the call for “individual rights” with a call for “society’s rights,” and to a call for more personal “freedom of choice” with a call for “a free society,” meaning a society that in an organic democratic sense, can decide its future *as a society* and not as a mere collection of individuals. This means that due to the social bonding process I have outlined as essential to the formation of human community, we need publicly to recognize that a society is indeed more than the sum of its parts.

Critics will say that the flourishing of the individual is the ultimate goal of society, and therefore I have things backward. But I argue the reverse: that we cannot have flourishing individuals except as embedded in a free society - which means a society permitted to grant distinctions and privileges to those who sacrifice for its noble work, and not to others who openly or by default refuse to sacrifice, or who are simply not interested in joining up, so to speak. I say, let them be. But do not shower on them all the rewards and protections of those who join in.

Restoration of a more free *society*, then - as opposed to more free *individuals* using state power and law against society (a process, as I say, which has left us naked before the marauding and power-hungry State) - would of course mean that individuals would be exposed to more, and more varied forms of moral authority, with which they could deal as they wish - but to far less coercive power from the State. We would be *more encumbered* in terms of opportunities to fulfill

- or reject - moral obligations, but *less encumbered* in terms of raw power. I think that would be a good deal. It would shift the ground of our political and moral relations from dependency on the grossly excessive ministrations and regulation of the State, to consent, independence, and belonging within *a real moral community that would serve as a buffer between ourselves and power*. The point is that a return to a defense of the traditional rights and authorities of civil society and especially of the Family as a protected and necessarily privileged institution, can satisfy our longing for community, as well as for freedom, but a freedom within community.

Because most human beings long to belong, I say let it be by choice to society, rather than by default to government.