

IN DEPTH: IDEOLOGY AND LEACOCK'S CLASSIC LIBERALISM

Understanding the criticism that Stephen Leacock is making of our electoral system in the “The Great Election in Missinaba County” and “The Candidacy of Mr. Smith” can be helped by understanding Stephen Leacock’s political ideology. However, defining Leacock’s politics is a difficult task. A survey of his writings often reveals a conflicted—though not necessarily contradictory—mind. For example, Leacock is a champion of democracy: “The principle of democratic rule has now become a permanent and essential factor in political institutions”⁷⁸. He is an Imperialist, loyal to the British Empire: “Nor is it ever possible or desirable that we in Canada can form an independent country”⁷⁹. As discussed in the chapter activities for “The Ministrations of the Rev. Mr. Drone,” he is not religious: “We have kicked out the devil as a ridiculous and absurd superstition, unworthy of a scientific age”⁸⁰. As discussed in the chapter activities for “The Extraordinary Entanglement of Peter Pupkin,” he certainly shares many of the disappointing views of his times about race: “The disaffected had found a leader in Louis Riel, a cracked visionary who had enough megalomania for two rebellions and not enough capacity for one”⁸¹. And as discussed in the chapter activities for “The Candidacy of Mr. Smith,” his views on gender are at times cringe-worthy: “Practically all of the world’s work is open to women right now, wide open. *The only trouble is that they can’t do it*” (his emphasis)⁸².

Religiosity aside, it should thus come as little surprise that Leacock was a life-long supporter of the Conservative Party. However, to narrowcast him through this lens would be a mistake. His ideal political party, he writes in *My Discovery of the West*, would combine “the empire patriotism of the Conservative, the stubborn honesty of the Liberal, the optimism of the Socialist, the driving power of the Social Creditor, and the unsullied enthusiasm of all who write the banner on the name and inspiration of youth”⁸³. Further, regardless of how terribly-dated many of his above-stated views are, those stances—while representative—only represent *part* of Leacock’s thinking. Leacock realises that at its worst democracy produces the election “of genial incompetents popular as spendthrifts; of crooked partisans warm to their friends and bitter to their enemies; of administration by a party for a party; and of the insidious poison of commercial greed defiling the wells of public honesty”⁸⁴. He supports Imperialism because Canada’s greatness could make us an equal partner with England “in an Empire, permanent and indivisible”⁸⁵. While Leacock is

78 Leacock, Stephen. *Elements of Political Science*. New and Enlarged Edition, Constable & Company, Ltd., 1921, p. 46.

79 Leacock, Stephen. “Greater Canada: An Appeal.” In *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*, edited by Alan Bowker, U of Toronto P, 1973, p. 10.

80 Leacock, Stephen. “The Devil and the Deep Sea: A Discussion of Modern Morality.” In *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*, edited by Alan Bowker, U of Toronto P, 1973, p. 44.

81 Leacock, Stephen. *Canada: The Foundations of its Future*. Montreal: House of Seagram, 1941, p. 165.

82 Leacock, Stephen. “The Woman Question.” In *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*, edited by Alan Bowker, U of Toronto P, 1973, p. 57.

83 Leacock, Stephen. *My Discovery of the West*. T.H. Best Printing Company, 1937, p. 256.

84 Leacock, Stephen. “The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice.” In *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*, edited by Alan Bowker, U of Toronto P, 1973, p. 114.

85 Leacock, “Greater Canada,” p. 4.

not religious, he holds that society's morality was established by "past ages'... authoritative moral code"⁸⁶. Leacock's disdain for Riel is tempered by a belief that the Métis uprising at Red River was "warranted, the anger justified. The government of Canada had been guilty of at least gross neglect"⁸⁷. And even though Leacock harbours an unfortunately traditional view of women, he also views legislation that positively discriminates against them as "a gross injustice. There is no defence for it"⁸⁸.

Perhaps, though, the writing that best reveals the interplay of Leacock's conservative mindset, his gentle nature, and his respect for popular will can be found in—of all places—a 1943 piece he wrote on corporal punishment. In it he relays that as a student, being caned was a point of pride because "[we] perhaps felt hurt by it but not degraded. On the contrary, it gave one something of the feeling of a veteran at the wars." Leacock waxes nostalgic for his years as a schoolmaster, having "licked no less than eight cabinet ministers, two baronets, and four British generals—to say nothing about one-half of the bench and the bar in Toronto." However, Leacock does not view these past experiences as an unassailable dictum for how society should be directed into the future: "But, observe that once the idea arises that physical punishment is a degradation, then it is. It has got to go. It is, as soon as you reflect upon it, mere barbarism"⁸⁹. Leacock, it seems, was not a static thinker and would respect the popular will.

Gerald Lynch uses the label "tory-humanist"⁹⁰ to describe Leacock. In making this claim, Lynch looks to Charles Taylor's *Radical Tories*, an exploration of the roots of Canada's "red tory" movement. The book cites Leacock's influence on its development. Canadian red tory conservatism descended from the British Tory tradition, and was influenced by the French and the United Empire Loyalists (see the chapter activities for "The Fore-Ordained Attachment of Zena Pepperleigh and Peter Pupkin"). This background created a conservatism that was wholly different than the United States' libertarian-based conservatism. "Unlike the caricatured capitalist," writes Taylor, "Canadian conservatives believe in an organic society and the mutual obligations among all classes. Which is why... they embrace the principle of social justice and even the welfare state"⁹¹. Taylor's views were written before the rise of the Reform Party in the late 1980s: many people would argue that Reform shifted Canadian conservative values closer to American conservative values. However, the idea of a conservative who embraces social justice and the welfare state can be argued to be a reasonable—though not perfect—description of Stephen Leacock.

Understanding Leacock's foundational political beliefs can be done through a look at Leacock's immensely-popular 1906 textbook *Elements of Political Science*, revised and expanded in 1913 and again in 1921. *Elements of Political Science* was Leacock's best-selling book. Equally helpful is his much briefer 1942 treatise *Our Heritage of Liberty*. These two books can help provide a base to understand Leacock's guiding ideological principles.

86 Leacock, "The Devil," p. 45.

87 Leacock, *Canada*, p. 165.

88 Leacock, "Woman Question," p. 57.

89 Leacock, Stephen. "Stephen Leacock on 'caning.'" *The Clearing House*, vol. 17, no. 6, 1943, p. 368.

90 Lynch, Gerald. *Stephen Leacock: Humour and Humanity*. McGill-Queen's UP, 1988, p. 4.

91 qtd. in Lynch, p. 3.

In *Our Heritage of Liberty*, Leacock demonstrates impressive knowledge of the origin and theory of the state, from the Greeks through to the French Revolution and beyond (even if he is guilty, as historian Margaret MacMillan says, of galloping through them). His first stop in recent manifestos relevant to modern thought is Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Typical of Leacock's penchant for simplification, he credits Smith with the rise of individual economic theory and boils down *Wealth of Nations* to its main theme: enlightened self-interest allows for an invisible hand to lead to betterment for all⁹². With lineage-based generalisation, Leacock also credits Smith for being "a Scot, thorough and cautious. He made a job of it, took twelve years and a thousand pages, and when the book was done, there was nothing more to say for a generation"⁹³. *Elements of Political Science* sticks to the explanatory, acknowledging the "general economic harmony"⁹⁴ brought about by Smith's work.

Neither book invests any critique exclusively into Smith's theory. This is peculiar. Not only is critique commonplace in most of Leacock's writing, but a generous portion of Leacock's 1903 doctoral dissertation, *The Doctrine of Laissez Faire*, is devoted to deconstructing *Wealth of Nations*. (Leacock wrote an even more devastating critique in 1935, "What is Left of Adam Smith?") While his dissertation does not strike down the overall intent of *Wealth of Nations*, it demonstrates its contradictions and shortcomings. The "serious qualifications"⁹⁵ that Smith's theory requires for free markets to actually function leaves Leacock to acidly declare "so much then for the general principle itself"⁹⁶.

Where Leacock does address general shortcomings with laissez-faire beliefs is in his next stop in *Our Heritage of Liberty*, John Stuart Mill. To be clear, Leacock holds Mill's beliefs in the highest regard. He says that "Mill stands with his feet firm" in his claim that individuals must be given the right of expression⁹⁷. Leacock conveys that John Stuart Mill speaks with "immortal dictum"⁹⁸ when claiming that there must be some "part of the life of every person within which the individuality of that person ought to reign uncontrolled... some space in human existence thus entrenched around and sacred from authoritative intrusion"⁹⁹. And Leacock even declares that *Liberty* is the "best expression ever given to the reasoned idea of individual freedom"¹⁰⁰. Where Leacock's critique surfaces is with Mill's advocacy for government to provide public services¹⁰¹, and Mill's

92 Leacock, Stephen *Our Heritage of Liberty*. John Lane the Bodley Head, 1942, p. 47.

93 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 47.

94 Leacock, *Elements*, p. 344.

95 Leacock, Stephen. "The Doctrine of Laissez Faire." In *My Recollection of Chicago and the Doctrine of Laissez Faire*, edited by Carl Spadoni, U of Toronto P, 1998, p. 23.

96 Leacock, "Doctrine," p. 58.

97 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 50.

98 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 50.

99 qtd. in Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 50.

100 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 48.

101 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 48.

belief that the government must coin money and operate a postal service¹⁰². To Leacock, these qualifiers are blazingly inconsistent with Mill's theories of liberty. However, they are also of "such obvious convenience and general utility as entirely to warrant the violation of individual liberty involved"¹⁰³. To Leacock, this is not so much an abdication of principle as it is a demonstration of the "difficulties [that] show how hard it is to follow consistently the thread of a single principle in a maze of circumstance"¹⁰⁴.

While a believer in individual liberty, Leacock believes that in practice it must have limits. To demonstrate this, Leacock props up anarchism in *Our Heritage of Liberty*. Quickly tracing through its peaceful ideological history and later associations with violent uprising, Leacock concludes that anarchism is only useful as a philosophy. Central to this criticism, Leacock writes:

It claims that there is no need for government at all. If you and I want to do anything in common we can do it by voluntary agreement. Our neighbours can join in with us. If we need protection at night we can club together and hire a watchman. That scheme of course is admirable for arranging a picnic or a fraternity dance, but mere insanity as applied to the conduct of all society.¹⁰⁵

Leacock says that reality has shown that people cannot all agree, thus forcing the compulsion of authority and the need for government to act to ensure the general welfare of citizens¹⁰⁶. For Leacock, anarchism simply cannot be implemented in practice.

While *Elements of Political Science* does not touch on anarchism, it still pillories extreme individualism. There, Leacock goes after individual liberty rooted in biological beliefs, or what would now be called social Darwinism. Leacock pointedly observes that:

If the sole test of fitness to survive is found in the fact of survival, then the prosperous burglar becomes an object of commendation, and the starving artisan an object of contempt. If it is assumed that widows will die unless the government helps them, and that usurers will grow rich unless the government stops them, this seems a very poor reason for saying that widows *ought* to die and usurers *ought* to grow rich.¹⁰⁷

Willingness to follow a biological doctrine of survival of the fittest to its logical outcome is so flawed and inhumane to Leacock, it "hardly needs detailed refutation"¹⁰⁸.

102 Leacock, *Elements*, p. 342.

103 Leacock, *Elements*, p. 342.

104 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 50.

105 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 52.

106 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 52-53.

107 Leacock, *Elements*, p. 346.

108 Leacock, *Elements*, p. 346.

Leacock's discounts of extreme individualism serve to illustrate his agreement with Mill. "In short," he writes, "any government must not only protect its citizens, but it must act positively in many ways for the general welfare"¹⁰⁹. However, with all the qualifications required of Mill's (and, for that matter, Smith's) theories, Leacock is left to question if in practice, this is so much a doctrine of liberty as it is a doctrine of social solidarity and collective action¹¹⁰.

Where social solidarity and collective action go too far into authoritative intrusion for Leacock is socialism, the last ideological stop in *Our Heritage of Liberty*. Leacock's consistent, lifelong view is that socialism is a dangerous and impossible proposition. That being said, Leacock is never entirely dismissive of the concept, either. In rationalising socialism as a theory, he lays out Karl Marx's argument that:

the more free the competition the more the weak are trampled by the strong. People with no property, he says, have to sell their labour power to people with property, who wouldn't buy it unless it brought in more than they gave for it. Seen thus, individual liberty and equality are not bread but a stone. What does it profit a man to have the right to refuse work, if refusal means starvation?¹¹¹

One of Leacock's main quibbles with how socialism proposes to solve this problem is that he believes that people are not constituted to work by voluntary effort. (He excludes many academics and professionals from this critique on the basis of their work being more like play.) Instead, Leacock holds that people are generally self-interested and predisposed to want to work for their own private gain, not for the public good¹¹². His summary refutation of socialism in *Our Heritage of Liberty*, however, is noteworthy in its backhanded tribute:

It is proper, however, to pay to the *idea* of socialism, not to the practice of it, the tribute which fittingly belongs to it. There can be no doubt of the underlying inspiration which explains its appeal to younger minds, to people entering upon life and cherishing high ideals. The notion of all people working together in cheerful comradeship sounds vastly better, after all, than the stingy maxim, "every man for himself." The only difficulty with socialism... is that it doesn't yet work; it is too good; if the day ever comes when we are good enough for such a system, then we shall need no system at all.¹¹³

Somewhat cryptically, in *Elements of Political Science* Leacock even goes so far as to suggest that socialistic theory contains "a great deal that is true and extremely useful in directing the proper

109 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 53.

110 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 49.

111 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 54.

112 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 55.

113 Leacock, *Heritage*, p. 56.

measures of social reform”¹¹⁴. Leacock’s textbook does not, however, explicate what specifically he finds useful in it for reform.

Concrete examples of where Leacock would go with reform can be found in his 1921 treatise *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*. Though long on rhetoric and short on concrete proposals—most of it is a blistering though at times misguided critique of socialism—its solutions to economic inequality offer quite progressive proposals. Here is an understanding of how Leacock would find resolution to his life-long frustration with society’s failure to fairly distribute wealth. Leacock believes it is necessary for the government to provide paid work for the unemployed, maintenance for the infirm and aged, and education and opportunity for children¹¹⁵. For workers, minimum wage must be legislated and the work day reduced to something around four or five hours¹¹⁶. The means to pay for Leacock’s proposals are progressive income taxes reaching 50%, and taxes on profits and inheritance “never dreamed of before”¹¹⁷. Cautious of socialism, such reforms are to be done in a manner so that the “vast mass of human effort must still lie outside the immediate control of the government”¹¹⁸. Leacock was so convinced of these policies, he declares that “no modern state shall survive”¹¹⁹ without implementing such reforms. It is really *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* that most concretely illustrates, at least in a prescriptive policy sense with relation to political economy and the market’s unequalising nature, how Leacock would apply Smith’s belief that “[t]hose exertions of the natural liberty of a few individuals which might endanger the security of the whole society... ought to be restrained by the laws of all government”¹²⁰.

While defining Stephen Leacock’s politics is a difficult task, it is possible to understand his general framework of underlying philosophical beliefs. Leacock believes in democracy. He is an advocate of individual liberty. He accepts the self-interested individual as reality. He champions the redistribution of resources across society. And he envisions the state’s role in the economy as police, not producer. There is no doubt that Leacock was behind the curve on gender and race issues, very much reflecting the views of his time. However, when it came to social welfare and economic redistribution, Leacock was particularly perceptive about the benefits and shortcomings of classic liberalism. In this sense, he was far ahead of most of the politicians of his day.

114 Leacock, *Elements*, p. 354.

115 Leacock, *Unsolved*, p. 140.

116 Leacock, *Unsolved*, p. 143.

117 Leacock, *Unsolved*, p. 141.

118 Leacock, *Unsolved*, p. 141.

119 Leacock, *Unsolved*, p. 140.

120 qtd. in Leacock, “Doctrine,” p. 26.



DISCUSS

1. Even though Leacock was a conservative, many of his university students have remarked that his course reading lists spanned political ideologies. This is consistent with John Stuart Mill's belief that people should learn about ideas from the idea's proponents as well as the idea's opponents. As Mill said in *On Liberty*:

Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. That is not the way to do justice to the arguments, or bring them into real contact with his own mind. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of; else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and removes that difficulty.¹²¹

Leacock practiced this idea in his teaching. As a result, many of his students went on to become not conservatives but rather leading socialist thinkers of the early- and mid-twentieth century.

- a) Do you agree? Does a person who only knows their own side of a case truly know the situation?
 - b) Do all views merit equal time and equal respect?
 - c) How can you ensure that you have all the information you need to form a valid opinion?
2. Historian Margaret MacMillan says that for Stephen Leacock, "the profound problem facing the twentieth century was one of the fair distribution of society's goods"¹²². Has society yet solved this problem?
 3. What ways do you see Leacock's politics reflected in his election chapters?
 4. In what ways do you see Leacock's politics kept out of his election chapters?

¹²¹ Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Penguin Classics, 1974, pp. 98-99.

¹²² MacMillan, Margaret. *Stephen Leacock*. Penguin Canada, 2009, p. 90.