



My Most Regretted Statements: A Symposium Prologue

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For the symposium presented here, we invited several leading intellectual figures to tell of their most regretted statements and to reflect on why they now regret those statements. We suggested a maximum length of 1,500 words.

Imagine that Jane Jacobs or Elinor Ostrom had written a 1,500-word reflection, “My Most Regretted Statements.” That would tell us about the doubts she had about her own beliefs, the risks she took, how her thinking evolved, and how she felt about her own published statements. It might illuminate her attitude toward other statements not included as among her most regretted statements. The symposium invited the contributor to open up to the reading public, to help the reading public to get to know the contributor. Also, it gives the contributor an opportunity to qualify some of the discourse she has put on the record.

The following passage from Adam Smith expresses the spirit of the project:

Frankness and openness conciliate confidence. We trust the man who seems willing to trust us. We see clearly, we think, the road by which he means to conduct us, and we abandon ourselves with pleasure to his guidance and direction. . . . The great pleasure of conversation and society, besides, arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another. . . . We all desire, upon this account, to feel how each other is affected, to penetrate into each other’s bosoms, and to observe the sentiments and affections which really subsist there. The man who indulges us in this natural passion, who invites us into his heart, who, as it were, sets open the gates of his breast to us, seems to exercise a species of hospitality more delightful than any other. No man, who is in ordinary good temper, can fail of pleasing, if he has the courage to utter his real sentiments as he feels them, and because he feels them. (TMS, 337)

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Smith also describes the sentiments of one “who, from false information, from inadvertency, from precipitancy and rashness, has involuntarily deceived”:

[I]f he is a real lover of truth, he is ashamed of his own carelessness, and never fails to embrace the first opportunity of making the fullest acknowledgments. If it is in a matter of some consequence, his contrition is still greater; and if any unlucky or fatal consequence has followed from his misinformation, he can scarce ever forgive himself. Though not guilty, he feels himself to be in the highest degree, what the ancients called, *piacular*, and is anxious and eager to make every sort of atonement in his power. (TMS, 338–339)

In the symposium, seven authors generously share their reflections on their most regretted statements:

- Monique Bégin tells of a statement she often repeated in her time as Canada’s Minister of National Health & Welfare: “Canada is the Sweden of the Americas.”
- Michael Boskin reflects on his time as Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers and the hazards of misattribution, of not controlling op-ed titles, and of equations going missing.
- Tyler Cowen reflects on his circa 2007 underestimation of the likelihood of a major financial crisis.
- Jon Elster draws from his work on defective belief formation, illustrating with his own past errors, including about the electorate binding itself and about thinking of anti-communists “as a clock that is always one hour late rather than as a broken clock that shows the right time twice a day.”
- Richard Epstein tells of his conversion to consequentialism.
- Sam Peltzman relates his hardy forecast in 1988 of Michael Dukakis’s impending victory over George H. W. Bush.
- Cass Sunstein begins: “I have said a lot of things that I regret.” And he ends: “A main job of academics is to float ideas and take risks, and if they do not make mistakes, or learn enough to change their minds, well, that’s really something to regret.”

We hope that the symposium will be of interest to everyone who takes public discourse seriously. Any leader in intellectual life has a personality, a character, that reflects higher-order interpretations, beliefs, and judgments. For those, she has to answer to her own conscience. Sharing insight into such matters might advance understanding and cohesion in public discourse. We are grateful to the

seven contributors for their generosity and for their openness in sharing their regrets.

References

Smith, Adam. 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

My Most Regretted Statements: Canada as a Welfare State

Monique Bégin²

I was among the first women elected from Quebec to Member of Parliament, with a large majority, and I was re-elected three times, serving as an MP from 1972 to 1984. During that time, in mid-September 1977, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau appointed me to Cabinet as Minister of National Health and Welfare, the biggest Department of the Canadian government, with its 25 percent of the federal budget. I was also responsible for the Medical Research Council. I was Minister during 1977–1979 and 1980–1984.

We revel in thinking of Canada as a great place to live, a society not afraid of offering both a universal ‘medicare,’ prepaid for all through general taxation, and a safety net to its people. We see that as our trademark in North America. But how much of a reality is that, and how much a myth?

Just before my appointment in 1977, a major restructuring of the federal funding formula for health care for the provinces had been unanimously agreed upon. The new formula shifted federal funding determinations almost entirely to Finance, rather than Health Canada. I had not really been briefed on our Medicare system. The feds were covering roughly 50 percent of all costs related to hospitals and to doctors practice, based on universal, free access.

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