

# The Problems of Modern Democracy

Samuel Gregg talks with George Weigel

Democracy is a matter of habits of the heart and mind—what were once called ‘virtues’—as well as the mechanics of government.

**George Weigel** is Senior Fellow at The Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington D.C. Mr Weigel is a Roman Catholic theologian and one of America’s leading commentators on issues of religion and public life. He has written numerous books on religious, political and economic matters including the highly acclaimed *Witness to Hope: the Biography of Pope John Paul*. In October 2000 he delivered the annual Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom for The Centre for Independent Studies.

**Samuel J. Gregg:** George Weigel, welcome to Australia. You have been in the think tank business for some time now, and the past 20 years have witnessed a flourishing of such institutions in the United States. What do you think have been the most important reasons for this development?

**George Weigel:** There have been some obvious sociological reasons for the think tank phenomenon: the growth of government and the commensurate growth of policy-related independent-sector institutions; the mass expansion of higher education; the presence of a vibrant philanthropic community interested in shaping the policy agenda through reshaping the policy debate. But perhaps the most intriguing reason has to do with the deterioration of real debate on university campuses, where various (dubious) leftist assumptions have prevailed for over a generation now. Those who want to think freshly and differently have had to look elsewhere for a perch.

**SJG:** It may sound obvious to say so, but it seems increasingly the case that people working within think tanks have been willing to ask questions that many scholars working in the universities tend to shy away from. Why

do you think this is the case? Is it primarily a reflection of the extent to which many believe that political correctness reigns in the academy? Or are there deeper, more systemic causes at work?

**GW:** I suppose some of it has to do with class consciousness within the professoriate: to get along, to demonstrate that you’re a member of the new ‘knowledge class’, means adhering to certain intellectual conventions. This then boils over into structural issues because of the tenure system, which is one of the most reactionary institutions in Western cultural life today. Those who find this kind of intellectual diffidence difficult, impossible, or just plain irritating look for other venues in which to pursue the intellectual life in conversation with public affairs. By the way, anyone who doesn’t understand the reign of political correctness on campus is like a fish who doesn’t know that he lives in something called ‘water’!

**SJG:** In your Acton lecture, you asked various questions about contemporary Western democracy that we are not accustomed to hearing from within the academy. Some have suggested that you (and, for that matter, the Pope) are articulating what amounts to a neo-Tocquevillian critique of contemporary Western democracy, with a particular attention to the erosion of respect for universal moral norms. Is there, in fact, a Tocquevillian dimension to your thinking about the problems of modern democracies?

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**Samuel Gregg** is the former Director of the *Religion and the Free Society* Programme at CIS. He is now Director of the Center for Economic Personalism at the Acton Institute (US).

**GW:** Yes, insofar as Tocqueville recognised that democracy was a matter of habits of the heart and mind—we used to call these ‘virtues’—as well as of the mechanics of governance. Thus I agree with Tocqueville that, in the United States, religion is the first of political institutions, not because it takes a direct policy role, but because it forms democratic citizens. I’d also agree with Tocqueville about the importance of voluntary associations in democratic life. When the only figures visible on the landscape of democracy are the individual and the state, democracy is in serious trouble.

**SJG:** Tocqueville, as we know, saw religion as having a critical role to play in the maintenance of the evolving democratic world that he observed in the short time that he spent in America. Thinking about the West today, do you think that the Christian churches are presently playing an adequate role in maintaining the moral underpinnings of freedom? Have some churches become so permeated by relativism and transitory intellectual fashions that they are no longer capable of this task?

**GW:** Most of what we used to call ‘mainline Protestantism’ is now firmly on the sideline in the debate over the cultural foundations of freedom, because of its capitulation to the notion of freedom-as-personal-autonomy and its wholesale surrender to the sexual revolution. Evangelical Protestantism, on the other hand, is a vibrant presence in American society and could become so in Canadian society. That is one of the reasons why the dialogue between evangelical Protestants and Catholic social doctrine—Christianity’s most intellectually-developed proposal for ordering the free and virtuous society—is so important.

**SJG:** As you observed in your Acton lecture, the language of human rights is one which makes specific claims to universality. It has, however, been posited that one problem that is undermining contemporary democracies is the phenomenon of what Mary Ann Glendon calls ‘rights talk’. Among other things, she uses this expression to describe the way in which various assertions and demands

are articulated by particular groups under the rubric of rights in order to foreclose argument about the merits of their case. Do you think that this is indeed a real problem, and if so, how do we restore a proper understanding of rights to the public square?

**GW:** Sure, it’s a real problem, not least when actions that, for centuries, have been understood as ‘wrongs’ are now understood as ‘rights’. I would favour a much leaner list of basic human rights—what we used to call civil rights and political freedoms—than what has become customary since the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights, but I’m under no illusions that I’m winning this argument.

**SJG:** Another concern that appeared to underline your lecture is the degree of judicial activism that some believe that many judges, especially in the United States, are indulging in. Do you think that Robert Bork is correct when he argues that the United States no longer has a constitution, because judges are now quite happy to read whatever they want into the words of the constitution so as to obtain their pre-determined preference?

**GW:** I’ve tried to avoid this conclusion for years, but I must concede now that Judge Bork was right. When the Supreme Court can (as it did this last term) blithely overturn a statute adopted 99-1 by a state legislature without giving that astonishing fact a moment’s notice, then we have to conclude that, on many of the most fevered issues of American public life, we’re being ruled, not by our duly elected representatives, but by unelected and largely unaccountable judges.

The same thing seems to be happening in Canada, and there are danger signals that the judicial usurpation of politics is also underway at the regional level (witness the new assertiveness of the European human rights courts). It seems only a matter of time before this breaks out, full-throttle, in other countries and at the global level. I have no problem with the concept of ‘judicial review’, but unless that oversight of the legislature and the executive is tied to a text, then constitutions mean nothing but what judges say they mean. This is not democracy.



**SJG:** Moving to an unrelated area: it has been said that John Paul II's 1991 social encyclical *Centesimus Annus* may be viewed as an vindication of the efforts of people like yourself, Michael Novak, and Fr Richard John Neuhaus to persuade those Christians who were hitherto very ambivalent about market economies that there is much in the free economy that they should celebrate: that it is not just a question of it being the lesser of two evils, but that it enables people to self-actualise various moral goods. How would you assess that analysis?

**GW:** The major credit here has to go to Michael Novak, who has been doing groundbreaking work in this field for two decades now. Fr Neuhaus's book, *Doing Well and Doing Good*, is also an indispensable commentary on the Pope's proposal in *Centesimus Annus*. What is John Paul II saying? He doesn't claim to be an economist. What he does argue, from the point of view of the Church's concept of the dignity of the human person, is that the free economy—which must always be disciplined and directed by law and a vibrant public moral culture—is an expression of human creativity and an arena for the exercise of responsibility.

I would also underscore the Pope's insistence that the poor should be thought of, not as a problem to be solved, but as people with potential. That potential is realised, not by welfare dependency, but by bringing the poor into what Fr Neuhaus calls the 'circle of productivity and exchange'. That's true in developed democracies as well as in the Third World.

**SJG:** In the 1970s and 1980s, one of the great internal debates within the church was over the various liberation theologies, especially those which quite openly drew upon Marxist analytical methods. Those forms of liberation theology, it would seem, are now dead and buried. But where do you see the next big internal church debate emerging when it comes to questions of politics and political economy? Environmentalism? Globalisation? Or will it be something unrelated?

**GW:** The next great theological debate in Catholicism will involve the development, throughout Asia and specifically in India, of theologies which seem to deny or minimise the unique salvific role of Jesus Christ. The recent Vatican document, *Dominus Iesus*, was a response to this

phenomenon, and if people would actually read the document I think they'll find it a bracing reminder that inter-religious dialogue is too serious and too important to be reduced to another exercise in political correctness. This will be difficult for a secular society, in which all religious convictions are regarded as mere lifestyle choices, to grasp. But grasp it we must, for what is at stake, at bottom, is nothing less than the question of whether there is any truth that we can know to be *the* truth.

**SJG:** Lastly, the state of religious liberty in the West. As you are aware, there are many in Australia and the United States who are concerned that it is slowly being whittled down to the freedom to worship and little else, usually in the name of 'anti-discrimination', though it seems evident that other agendas are also at work. Obviously, you won't be familiar with the details of the Australian situation, but do you believe that this is a genuine problem in the United States? If so, how do those who believe in religious liberty in the fullest sense of that word deal with these challenges?

**GW:** It's a very serious problem in the United States, thanks again to an activist Supreme Court which seems to have decided to establish secularism as the national creed. To deny religiously-informed moral argument a place in public debate over public policy is profoundly undemocratic. So is the tendency to force religious institutions, like schools and social service agencies, to be something other than what they are—expressions of faith and embodiments of certain moral convictions.

Some years ago, a federal regulatory agency asked the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which was receiving some very government modest help (blankets, beds, and so forth) for its shelters for the homeless, if the name of

one of these shelters couldn't be changed from the 'St. Vincent de Paul Shelter' to the 'Mr. Vincent de Paul Shelter'. One doesn't know whether this is farce or tragedy, but it is certainly confusion,

and confusion of the sort that threatens the classic notion of democracy as a richly textured community of communities.

**SJG:** George, I thank you for this interview.

