

I want to congratulate Dave Quist and the team at IMFC on this very important conference, and I hope that many exciting developments emerge from it.

It's an honor and privilege to be able to respond to Iain Duncan Smith today. He and Tim Montgomerie and Philippa Stroud at the Centre for Social Justice have been incredibly influential in spurring a number of us to think in new ways about social breakdown and why and how we should care for those in need.

Some of these ideas have been batted around U.S. policy in recent years as well. They've been expressed as welfare reform, school choice, and innovations in social service delivery that include faith-based options. There are a number of other examples I could name, but for the most part, these stand-alone initiatives have been like staccato notes. We've had a few faltering attempts to string these together into something larger.

But so far in the U.S. experience, we've lacked the melody or narrative that captures the moral imagination of the American public and transforms their ideas about society. And that's why the work of Iain and the Centre for Social Justice is such an important model. They are achieving a breakthrough in public understanding that society is *the* central governing question.

I've been asked to respond to Iain from a social issues perspective, and I will draw on our American experiences as I do that.

I want to begin by introducing you to two young people in Washington, D.C.-- Tiffany and Josh. Both of them are black, both from low-income families, and both from hard neighborhoods.

Tiffany's mother had personal struggles that made it difficult for her to provide for daughter, so she was raised by her grandmother. Tiffany showed a lot of promise, and her grandmother deeply wanted to give her the best opportunities. But the assigned public schools were some of the worst in the city, and her grandmother couldn't afford a private school.

When she was about 12, her 17-year-old cousin was killed. He had been the "hope of the family," doing really well in school and headed to university. Tiffany was profoundly affected by the event and vowed to fulfill his dream (and the dream of their family) of going to university.

That might have remained a distant dream, but for a scholarship that helped her escape the troubled public high school in her neighborhood and attend a Catholic high school with excellent academics instead. She did so well that she graduated valedictorian of her class in 2008.

Tiffany has just started her second semester at university in New York, where she's off to a great start and achieving her college dream. You can imagine the pride and joy of her family.

Meanwhile, Josh grew up in a similarly troubled neighborhood in Washington. It wasn't a place that encouraged young people to aim high at all. But Josh and a little group of childhood friends were determined to make it out and go

to college.

Their neighborhood school proved to be a hindrance and not a help toward their goal. It was poor quality and prone to violence. Josh's family couldn't afford to send him to private school, but his mother heard about the voucher opportunity. They applied and Josh was one of the fortunate few who got a scholarship. He too attended Catholic high school and did very well. Now Josh is in his first year of university in North Carolina.

It's a happy ending as far as it goes.

But Josh can't go back home--literally. His family has decided that he should spend school breaks with relatives out of town rather than return to his old neighborhood and all its problems. The risk is too great, his mother says. Better to miss him at Christmas than to have him come this far and then lose it all.

Imagine, all that effort and hope placed on getting Josh across the finish line of graduation and then not being able to continue in regular family life because the surrounding culture is too toxic.

There are a few things I want to highlight in these two stories about Tiffany and Josh:

- Each of them had personal hopes, high aspirations--exactly the right kind of values and motivation... But the status quo not only failed to reward their aspirations--it actually worked against them.

- Each of them succeeded because of external expectations as well-- schools that demanded more; a culture of expectations from people nearest to them.
- And relationships played a critical role: family members who sacrificed, prioritizing their learning; a grandmother's hope in the case of Tiffany; a counter-cultural group of friends who banded together in the case of Josh
- Finally, from an educational point of view, these are success stories. But they are not success stories in terms of transforming community. Social breakdown shows up in a variety of tangled ways in the stories of Tiffany and Josh, and restoring society is going to require holistic new ways of tackling these problems.

Well the reason I'm telling this American story to a Canadian audience in a response to a British speaker, is to highlight the universal elements in restoring society, the elements that we can transfer between our respective political and cultural contexts.

I'd like to share three observations prompted the work of Iain and the CSJ:

- 1) The nature of society and why it should be at the center of our concerns about;
- 2) The nature of effective strategies to overcome social breakdown consistent with our conservative principles;
- 3) Why social justice is a compelling idea to explain this vision.

## **I. SOCIETY**

If society is the central governing question for us to consider, what are its essential elements?

1. FAMILY is the first essential element. Family, centered on healthy marriage, free to exercise its legitimate authority...and **strong** enough to exercise that authority.
  - a. Family is, after all, the first school of self-worth, self-government, aspirations, and relationships;
  - b. No other institution or agent can equal its capacity to provide for the welfare of the next generation.
2. The family is embedded in community, and depends on surrounding supportive INSTITUTIONS--the second essential element
  - a. These institutions reinforce the family in its central role. They include churches, schools, and community.
  - b. They have unique authority that works in more subtle ways than the power of the state to motivate good behavior. Consider, for example, who you'd you rather have enforcing order in your neighborhood...gang leaders, armed police, or the busybody on the corner who nags you every time you don't put the trash bin away in good time and who keeps watch on her front porch whenever she senses that the children are up to mischief.
3. The habits and values that sustain our life together in a self-governing society:
  - a. trust, work ethic, marital commitment, personal responsibility, mutual responsibility through relationships, confidence in distinguishing right and wrong, respect for human life and dignity, living within our means.

## **II. Interventions:**

If society is the individual rooted in stable family, embedded in a community of supportive institutions, nurtured by sustaining values and habits, then we are far from the good society.

We're far from stable family formation in the U.S. when 4 out of 10 children are born outside marriage, and about 7 out of 10 black children.

And school is far from a supportive institution when one in eight students in our national capital report being assaulted with a deadly weapon.

And we're far from sustainable values when a young man like Josh has successfully navigated DC public schools and made his way to college but can't come back home.

As Iain has pointed out, social breakdown has reached levels that we cannot afford to ignore--economically or morally. So how do we address social breakdown? Well, the character of interventions matters, and the interventions that Iain has alluded to here today are pro-society.

Pro-society interventions respect and seek to restore family, mediating institutions, and sustaining values and habits.

This contrasts sharply with American policy interventions over the last half century:

1) For decades, American policymakers on the Left barricaded themselves behind cash handouts and bureaucratic paperwork and declared themselves to be waging a War on Poverty. Their strategy failed. They failed because they treated social breakdown primarily as a lack of material resources and responded with spending. That has built bureaucracy, but it hasn't restored society. And too often, it has hurt those it was meant to help.

2) And rather than cultivating sustaining values we've engaged in social experiments that have eroded family and community stability, and marginalized important mediating institutions like religious groups that have vast resources to contribute to the common good. The well-to-do and the middle class can muddle through social experimentation because they have thick social networks that easily double as safety nets. But neglecting sustainable values has wrecked havoc on the low-income and at-risk, who often have little safety net other than the government to fall back on when family falls apart or communities crumble.

In the United States, we talk about the American dream...each generation's hope that their children's reach will exceed their own grasp. For most of American history, children were able to reach higher by standing on the strong foundation of their fathers. But in recent decades, we've treated the building blocks like marriage, moral order, and work ethic as optional rather than as foundational. And we're finding that it's awfully hard to reach higher without them.

## **Two example interventions:**

At the same time, we do have examples of successful pro-society interventions in the U.S., and these include welfare reform and school choice, as I mentioned earlier:

- 1) Welfare reform transformed a program of permanent handouts that encouraged lifetime dependence into one that offered a hand-up to self-sufficiency through work and stable family formation through marriage.

Welfare rolls were reduced by half and black child poverty reached its lowest level in history. Welfare reform was one of the most successful domestic policy reforms of the last half century.

- 2) School choice: In 2004, Congress passed the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, allowing about 2000 low-income students to escape the broken public school system in our nation's capital. Washington, D.C., spends more per pupil than any of the 50 states,[\[1\]](#) yet ranks lowest academically in the entire country. Almost half the students don't even make it through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. And as I already mentioned, public schools in Washington, D.C. are also notoriously violent.

The scholarship program empowers parents to choose a school that reinforces their values and supports their family. Not surprisingly, parents are highly satisfied with the program. Students feel safe and test scores are on the rise.



Regrettably, both these policies are already in jeopardy from the new team in charge of Washington. But they remain examples of interventions that seek to restore society.

What they don't exemplify is the kind of systematic, comprehensive, rhetorically unified policy strategy that Iain and his team at the CSJ have outlined in reports like Breakthrough Britain. American welfare reform of 1996 transformed just one major program--there are more than 50 other federal means-tested programs that need similar pro-society overhauls. And a stand-alone voucher initiative gives individual students like Josh a shot at escaping a dead-end community, but it won't transform that neighborhood.

We need to systematically review social welfare programs to identify where they are eroding society by creating dependence.

We need to develop solutions that restore society.

And we need to present these ideas in a rhetorically unified and compelling narrative that will inspire the public to rethink the problems of social breakdown and the goal of restoring society. That brings me to the topic of social justice as a frame for these ideas.

### **III. Conclusion: Social Justice**

For several years, we've been having conversations about these ideas among conservatives, and Iain and the CSJ's use of the term was something new for most of us. Each country has a different political discourse and

different perceptions of social justice, but the idea is an important and compelling one.

This past year I came across some helpful ideas on social justice by Michael Novak, a scholar of religion and free society. He defines it as "a specific habit of justice that is 'social' in two senses."

(1) "First, the skills it requires are those of inspiring, working with, and organizing others to accomplish together a work of justice. These are the elementary skills of civil society, through which free citizens exercise self-government...

(2) "[I]t aims at the good of the city, not at the good of one agent only."

I think that captures well what Iain has been talking about here today. But for the political philosophers in the room, Novak goes on to conclude:

*"[I]f Tocqueville is right that 'the principle of association is the first law of democracy,' then social justice is the first virtue of democracy, for it is the habit of putting the principle of association into daily practice."<sup>ii</sup>*

What I find most profoundly different about the vision that Iain has outlined for seeking the good society and mending breakdown is how it calls on the natural resources of a self-governing people and demands society-wide engagement. The problems are cultural and relational, and the resources are cultural and relational as well. And because individual transformation is possible, cultural and relational resources are endlessly renewable. This is very much in contrast to schemes that treat problems as material, and segregate society by redistribution

of wealth, taking from some and giving to others, creating perverse incentives and undermining sustaining values.

The character of our culture determines the strength and stability of our economy and our ability to lead in the world. At this level the distinctions between economic and social policy become artificial. Whether you call it community breakdown or human capital squandered the result is the same and the solutions are the same. We need strong families, communities and institutions that reinforce them, and sustaining values and habits. We need to spend much more time thinking about governing strategies that put society first, and I'd like to thank IDS and the IMFC for helping us toward that end.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Novak, "Defining Social Justice," *First Things*, December 2000.