

Who Cares?

Creative Responses to Social Obligations – A Dialogue Series

Redefining Citizenship: Constructing an Inclusive and Participatory Model of Citizenship

A dialogue with Dr. Mark Kingwell, Gordon Hogg and Milton Wong
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– Mark Kingwell

This dialogue began with an evening lecture delivered by Mark Kingwell and a subsequent question period. A full day of discussion followed, beginning with an exchange between Mark Kingwell, Gordon Hogg and Milton Wong. This monograph summarizes the evening presentation, and then moves on to examine key themes that emerged in discussion both with the audience and between the three featured participants.

MARK KINGWELL'S PRESENTATION: "I AND THOU"

Mark Kingwell is a philosopher who has focused on questions of social obligation and the role of citizenship in sustaining a just and democratic society. He is a public intellectual who has written widely in the popular press and regularly engages with citizens outside the academic community.

The presentation was titled "I and Thou," in reference to the book of the same name by early 20th century European philosopher and mystic, Martin Buber. Dr. Kingwell began by outlining some of the fundamental issues that are in play when we think about the nature of social obligation, the basic philosophical and human concerns that provide the foundation for our sense of what we owe to each other. In understanding our obligations to one another we need first to think about the nature of consciousness. We have to focus our attention on what it means to be an "I" if we are going to go any distance in talking about social obligation, and this means considering the questions: What is it to be human? What is it to be a person?

One of the answers philosophers have offered in the past is that a person is a combination of memory and bodily integrity. For Dr. Kingwell, this definition is restrictive and has a history of being narrow and sometimes oppressive in its application. He has chosen to move away from this kind of definition and look instead at the nature of consciousness.

Looking at consciousness brings up what philosophy has called "the problem of other minds," or the limitation we have as individual minds lacking absolutely certain knowledge that there are other minds beyond our own. Solipsism has been one response to this

uncertainty, the idea that if I can't know for sure that anyone else exists, I must accept the fact that I'm the only mind that exists. Dr. Kingwell dismissed solipsism as not only an unpleasant option but one that, if pushed far enough, is also an incoherent option. This is because we do not create our "I"s by ourselves. He said, "To be the 'I' who I am is to have other people in my consciousness, not because I have direct access to theirs, but because the structure and texture of mine makes no sense without them."

The Cartesian response to the problem posits us as minds isolated from each other trying by various imperfect means to bridge the gap which cannot ultimately be bridged. Dr. Kingwell thinks this picture needs to be abandoned as well, again because consciousness makes no sense without the existence of other consciousness. "There is only the shared consciousness, which is a world, and the 'I' which I think I am is just one node in that shared world, a kind of knot in the net of existence." So if this is a better picture of what it means to be a person, if to be a person one has to have this experience of feeling oneself to be an "I," what follows?

Thoughts on citizenship

Thinking of citizenship as the political expression of shared consciousness is a departure from how it has been conceived historically in the West. Three major models of citizenship have dominated, all of them exclusive in certain ways.

1. The earliest model was based on a shared bloodline where citizenship came from being part of the clan.
2. The second model was based on shared religious or ideological beliefs, requiring everyone to accede to the same code in order to enjoy the benefits of citizenship.
3. The third model arose from a major advance in Western thinking that based citizenship on law, and established the notion of equality before the law as an essential aspect of being a member of a social group. In practice, this model has been exclusive too, with people being ruled out on the basis of gender or skin color. The idea that the law should be applied universally lies behind this model, and the liberation movements of the modern world have resulted in extensions of the protection of the law to previously excluded groups.

In putting forward a new way of thinking about citizenship, Dr. Kingwell said: "Even if we were to expand citizenship as law to a universal dimension, we would be missing something. And what would be missing, I think, is this sense of this shared undertaking which our world is. A form of sharing that isn't just about finding ourselves here in the same predicament, but this deeper form of sharing that my existence, as me, makes no sense without you, that I cannot understand by own 'I-ness' without the presence of the 'thou.'"

A new definition of citizenship

This new notion of citizenship is based on participation, which is not merely to say participate and you will be a citizen. There is one model of participatory citizenship in which

you only get the benefits of citizenship if you are willing to risk your life for the state, but that's not what Dr. Kingwell means. He is looking at participatory citizenship that puts the other side of the equation into play.

“Too often, I think, we think of politics as the assertion of individuality. I need to ask for or demand that my claims be taken seriously. And this, of course, is hugely important but it's only one side of the political story because we also, as citizens, have to be make sure that we are caring for the rest, not merely asserting the self. *And this is what I mean by participation: that sense of not just what do we owe to each other as if it were a set of obligations or debts paid off or, worse, in contemporary politics, a series of cost-benefit analyses where taxes are swapped for services but rather, the very idea that we are a part of something we share.*”

The challenge is to have this kind of sharing at the heart of our political obligation while maintaining the liberal tolerance and diversion of viewpoints which is one of the great achievements of the modern world. The answer, says Dr. Kingwell, is one that we work out through the business of being citizens.

A shared world

Martin Buber was interested in the deep challenge posed by otherness. In the original German, Buber's book is titled *Ich and Du*. “Du” is the familiar form of you, the you who is a close friend, suggestive of more intimacy than comes through in “thou.” In his presentation, Dr. Kingwell secularized Buber not to take the spirituality out of the “I and Thou” relationship, but to put spirituality back into social and political life without talking about God. Otherness, Dr. Kingwell said, is “a challenge that not only forces me to be responsible to it but, when genuinely pursued, when genuinely faced, throws me back upon myself so that sometimes there are moments which are dialogic without being conversational.” These moments come when an ‘I’ and a ‘thou’ are not attempting to bridge a misunderstanding or hammer out a compromise or make themselves understood. These moments operate outside the model that is insistently individual, outside of what is often the everyday business of politics where we each seek to be heard, they are rather something deeper and more existential.

Dr. Kingwell concluded with the following: “When I am sometimes simply in the presence of the other, when I maybe am silent and offer my presence as my dialogue, there is a moment of reflection that opens up, or might, where I look deep inside myself and think: What is it that makes me, me? How did I get here? Where am I going? And this other, this thou, which is you who is sitting next to me: What do you mean to me?”

EVENING DISCUSSION

The discussion following Dr. Kingwell's presentation was rich with questions and comments that provided the opportunity for exploring his interlocking ideas about personhood and participatory citizenship, and how these ideas might be translated into political action. As Dr. Kingwell made clear throughout the dialogue, these ideas are in the process of being developed and because of their nature, they may always be in process.

On being a person

In the West, there has been a strong urge to normalization with respect to the idea of personhood. We have tended to accept only one model of what it means to be a person and, in practice it has been a very limited model. Central to this model has been various definitions of rationality.

One woman recounted how, according to the laws of Canada, women became persons only in 1929, and another person commented on the way in which the philosophical tradition, from Aristotle through Locke, argued that those lacking in certain degrees of reason are excluded from personhood and hence citizenship, and how this argument was used around women and race until those groups were able to prove that they also belonged to the community of reason. He stated that many of those attending this dialogue are involved with a traditionally excluded group of people who are going to have difficulty making their case for inclusion on the basis of reason.

Dr. Kingwell responded by speaking about the need to move away from reason as the arbiter of political connection. *“We think reason is the solution to all of our problems, when in fact, as I argue, and it is not just me, imagination is far more important politically.”* Imagination will allow us to make the kind of connection that Buber was writing about, imagination gives us the ability to feel that special kind of pain which is pain at the pain of others. For Dr. Kingwell, *“This seems to me to be an absolutely key moment in the very idea of shared citizenship, that your pain will pain me. What it comes down to is a sense of the shared fragility of our existence. It is not the kind of answers philosophers usually give about what makes a person. A person is fragile and has imagination.”*

A new approach to personhood

The mother of a young woman with a disability asked Dr. Kingwell to comment on the personhood of people with disabilities and he gave the following response:

“I think we find ourselves at an interesting moment when we are forced because of what we know to be true about others who don’t fit the models that have dominated in the past, we are forced to revise our models. I led off with this question of “what makes a person?” and never completely answered it because I think we are in the process of answering it always. There may be, I think, cases in which even the most expansive criteria will have to be bolstered by our own decisions to care. That is, that we will want to put ourselves in the role of advocates and caretakers and that will be part of our interests as persons. If we don’t do that, I think we will find ourselves often having certain subsets of the population to which we apply even an expansive definition and find that they fall short, and then our question to ourselves will have to be ‘well, so then what do we do with them?’ I have a feeling that many of you in this room deal with those kinds of questions in a practical way all the time. I don’t think there is a theoretical, a pre-theoretical answer to those difficulties. We can come up with various ad hoc things.”

“We are trying to figure out what an acceptable set of criteria for personhood might be. It is not a philosophical issue in the pejorative sense. It is not an issue for the seminar room. It is an issue for everyday. It is not even just a political issue. It is a human issue for every encounter you have with every entity on every street, on every intersection.”

A lived example

Several participants spoke about their relationships with others who fall outside the criteria generally used to attribute personhood, and one woman spoke about caring for her aging mother with Alzheimers. “When I would be in the presence of my mother, who for the last three years of her life had no idea who I was or those around her as far as I could tell, it made me wonder,” she said. “I did not know anymore what I meant to her. It was very clear to me what she meant to me.” The women went on to ask Kingwell, “I think it was in those moments, she is still very much physically present, but gone sometimes, is she still a person in your construction?” She recounted his comment about dialogue not having to involve conversation, and asked to hear his thoughts about those kinds of encounters between self and other when much of what usually defines our relationships is impossible.

Dr. Kingwell responded, “It was just that sort of situation that I was imagining when I talked that way because you ask: Is she a person in those moments? And the only answer to that question is you make her a person in those moments, because of your presence there with her as her daughter. The tragic dimension in all of this, of course, is that we can’t know. You can’t know what is going on for her.”

How do we know what the other is? While most of us haven’t had such a difficult version of the question put to us, it points to the fragility we all share: the fragility of not being able to know. There are moments we all have when we find out about an infidelity, a disloyalty, even just a lack of respect, and in these moments we are most human because that is when we feel our fragility most keenly and realize that this construct of “I” really does depend on others, on all of these people who at some point you can’t actually depend on. This is a terrible realization, when we feel like our usually stable construct of selfhood has somehow been wounded or damaged. And that is when we know we are fragile.

Liberalism and citizenship

In the early modern era, we began shifting from a model of citizenship in which religious differences were justifiable grounds for killing one another to the rational model where differences are tolerated. Then, through the 18th and 19th centuries, an excessive insistence on the sovereignty of the individual came out of that language of tolerance and that came to be called liberalism.

Several participants were interested in how we can retain the virtues of liberalism, especially tolerance for different ideas of the good life, while at the same time establishing sufficient common ground to enable dialogue. Dr. Kingwell responded that in his new model of citizenship, he wants to maintain a relatively thin conception of the good and a relatively robust priority of right. At the same time, he put forward that we, as individuals, are not

sovereign in any reasonable philosophical respect. We may carve out forms of legal system which give individuals certain kinds of rights, but the metaphysical claim of sovereignty for individuals is unsupported. What we call individuals are, in fact, these nodes of sharing. *As citizens we need to recognize that the only political forms that will answer to our needs are ones that are based on this sharing, rather than on the excessive sovereignty of the individual.*

Participatory citizenship

The call for more engagement on the part of citizens isn't about a series of policy levers or disincentive schemes. The kind of engagement required has to come from within; it can't be forced. What Dr. Kingwell is talking about is an internal commitment to a social project, the kind of commitment that starts at the level of education and public debate, but that is also about very basic things like how we speak with our friends and neighbours, how we conceive what it means to be here in this shared world. It doesn't admit of an immediate practical solution. There are no policy guidelines. As Dr. Kingwell quipped, "There is no power point presentation; put it that way."

Gordon Hogg, the government minister charged with restructuring the Ministry of Children and Family Services in British Columbia, shared examples of the complexity and uncertainty, the lack of clear guidelines, that result when the political process is opened to participation. He has been travelling around the province talking with people about the government's move towards community-based service delivery models and explaining that he can't tell people exactly what the end result is going to look like because it will come out of the dialectic happening in their communities. This open dialogue plays a part in changing the structures that will allow us to move away from sterile decision making. The uncertainty of the process can be frustrating for people and for the government ministry, even as it opens the possibility of new ways to create opportunities for full inclusion.

Role of the state

A number of participants were interested in where individual responsibility ends and state responsibility takes over. While each of us has the capacity to help, and each of us in turn needs help, the comment was made that we must recognize junctures where acting alone or in small groups is not sufficient. This is the place where we need to come together in formal systems of governance. There are also times where impersonal assistance is far more appropriate than personal assistance, and when the scale of resources that are required can only come out of a collective sharing of resources through taxation.

Dr. Kingwell concurred that there is a subset of the state's activity that should be precisely consistent and impartial and not open to routine question. He felt that more imagination needs to be exhibited when people actually interact with their government and its provisions. That is part of what leadership means, using imagination in the application of law at the everyday level.

The importance of imagination in political life was underlined when Dr. Kingwell spoke about the need for those who engage in political life to be at least somewhat philosophical. If they are not, he said, then they are not engaged in the service of justice. "I think this is the problem we see so often. Our mistrust or contempt for politicians is based on what we observe, which is that they are not interested, or apparently not interested, in social justice. They are interested in brokering interest and protecting the incumbency." Leadership means knowing when to return the power to the people who will be affected by the decisions, knowing when the bureaucratic apparatus is a hindrance rather than a help to delivering the ends of justice.

Parameters of citizenship

The comment was made that this notion of citizenship is without borders and Dr. Kingwell concurred. We live in a time when everyone is aware of the limitations on the nation state's ability to deliver resources to its citizens and protect the interests of those citizens against transnational economic forces. "If we follow the logic of connection out, it has to be transnational. The national boundary of Canada can't be a relevant line between me and the Other." As for our responsibility to future generations, the best way we can serve them, Dr. Kingwell suggested, is in the form of institutional inheritance, by actively engaging to create structures that will benefit them as they have benefited us.

Who is a citizen?

The word "compassion" came up several times in the discussion. Linked to imagination, compassion is the pain we feel at the pain of others, the joy we feel at their joy. For Dr. Kingwell, *compassion is an essential basis for a just society*.

In considering participatory citizenship, Dr. Kingwell explained that when it came to people on the margins he leaned for a while on the notion of advocacy, the idea being that a standard model of dialogic participation would answer for almost everybody, and then, at the margins, people who did not fulfill the criteria of that model wouldn't be excluded, they would be brought to the center through forms of advocacy. While this isn't a bad answer, it is a limited one because it has the potential to perpetuate forms of condescension or distance, and this was one of the reasons Dr. Kingwell moved to consider imagination and our shared fragility.

He explained, "*I wanted to focus today on the very idea of being in the presence of the other. I think the more you push any set of criteria, the more they are going to show themselves to be inadequate, so it becomes increasingly focused down to a really basic primal, existential encounter with another entity. And you don't know what that other entity is. It is not IT. I don't even want to say IT; I want to leave it open ended because the entity might be all kinds of things that we haven't yet encountered. We don't know what is going on with the entity but that we have to be open. There has to be an openness. I really feel that we are at the limits of theory when we get there. I really do. You probably won't hear too many philosophers confess themselves to be at the limits of theory, but I think we are.*"

FRIDAY DIALOGUE

The morning began with an open and lively exchange between Mark Kingwell, Gordon Hogg and Milton Wong. Once again, one of the main thrusts of the discussion was how to translate these ideas about inclusive personhood and citizenship into political action. The same themes were picked up by other participants in comments and presentations throughout the day. What follows is an overview of the morning dialogue, augmented with related comments from discussions that took place later in the day.

Mark Kingwell's summary

Searching for a model of citizenship that goes beyond those based on shared bloodline, shared beliefs, and shared law, Dr. Kingwell has put forward a model of citizenship based on participation. In trying to cash out this approach to citizenship, a number of background philosophical issues arise regarding what makes a person a person. He began the day by identifying three key elements in his treatment of these background issues:

1. The aspect of imagination which underlies compassion and makes it possible to feel the pain of being pained by someone else's pain;
2. A sense of shared fragility that recognizes we are all in many ways co-determining in our identity, that our identities as individuals are far from secure, and that a sense of recognizing that we are all fragile in that way is extremely important to any notion of citizenship worth defending;
3. The notion of presence, what Dr. Kingwell called, "in some ways the wispiest but the most important aspect," this is the act of putting myself in the presence of the other and not so much offering help, but finding something out about myself. "It is impossible for me to conceive of myself without putting myself in the presence of the other and so that very kind of mysterious existential encounter really with the Other lies at the heart of identity."

Moving from theory to action

How these ideas can be made politically relevant was the question the group returned to throughout the day. How is participation translated into policy? How do we shift power so that this notion of citizenship is possible? Looking in the other direction, what does this mean for larger political structures? What social orders will be relevant when we think about what it means to belong?

Milton Wong used the social change that has occurred in his lifetime to contextualize the discussion, reminding us about the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese Internment, Aboriginal issues, the acceptance of women as persons on an employment basis, and the benchmark Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations in 1947. The moral values inherent in the rejection of exclusionary practices are values that have impacted him personally and effected how he conducts his leadership in the community. Moving to the present, he spoke about sustainability, the growing recognition that we all share the Earth, and the consequent responsibility we have to each other.

Gordon Hogg was grappling with the practical application of Dr. Kingwell's ideas, the political and institutional realities of moving power out of traditional places so it is shared by individuals, families and communities. Over the course of the past year, with support from people across the community, and those in community living in particular, the Ministry of Children and Family Development has been trying to change its institutional structure. The Minister was very interested in how these abstract ideas of openness and sharing are reflected in concrete action in communities. He said that if we are going to be able to move forward with developing systems and processes that ensure that we can have a society which is inclusive, a society which ensures that power is diffuse and shared, then we need to maintain a sense of humanness and fragility and vulnerability. He commented that the Ministry seems often to be on the defensive, despite the very best intent, and he wanted to shift that defensiveness to openness.

Other participants commented on the importance of the project the Ministry is undertaking, as well as the difficulties involved in moving political discussions back into the community. One woman commented that it is very hard to get power out of government and referenced the complex weave of policies, treasury boards, central agencies and legislation that form the operational mechanism of government. Several people acknowledged that it is a risky endeavor for a politician, but an essential one. Indeed, there are risks for everyone in the process of trying to reframe how communities respond to people with disabilities and their families. The actions underway are an attempt to operationalize a new approach to citizenship, so with large risks there also comes much promise.

An exciting example of institutional change through the application of a conceptual framework rooted in openness and caring was provided by the Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion in a short presentation about a process they recently initiated. The group took the ideas behind *Philia* and created actions to match, finding ways of implementing organic ideas in an institutional setting. The results have been inspiring for people within the association and beyond. The comment was made that we need to find processes that allow a very different engagement, that allow us to engage in something without guaranteeing what the outcome is going to be.

Cultivation of virtue

Milton Wong spoke about the need to pay attention to shared values, to pass values from one generation to the next, to find ways of transferring social values so as to ensure that core moralities persist despite impacts from so many directions, especially in an age of technological power.

Dr. Kingwell took this further by suggesting we should speak about the cultivation of character, or that old fashioned word "virtue." He stressed the need to find ways that we can motivate internally. Even as we talk about policy initiatives and incentive schemes, we have to be mindful that the results we are talking about can't come solely by application of external means. "You can force people to do certain kinds of things," he said. "You can reward them and punish them to get certain kinds of results, but if they are not internally

motivated then you won't get the kind of rich results that we are talking about, and we will be locked into a limited position." He advocated starting a conversation about education, for ourselves and others, that cultivates traits of character that will translate into this kind of action. Character and action are mutually reinforcing, to have character is to be disposed to act in a certain way, but to act in such a way also cultivates character. Dr. Kingwell stressed that the shift from implementing external motivation to cultivating internal motivation is critical.

The "old fashioned" language of virtue recurred throughout the day. One person commented that they had been raised to value integrity, honesty, trust, and love, and had watched society change until those values seemed to be lost. In recent years, however, they had seen a return of these values and believed they are gradually increasing.

Justice as inclusive dialogue

Gordon Hogg spoke about the reality of engaging in dialogue as a society when there are many people who have not been involved in the type of reflection taking place in this discussion. Dr. Kingwell responded that he tries to find ways of pushing people towards philosophical reflection, not just because it is good in itself, but because of its important political consequences of deepening and enriching what it means to have a shared social structure. He spoke of trying to draw people into ways of thinking that may be unfamiliar to them, and jokingly called this "the seduction theory of philosophy."

In good-humoured banter with Dr. Kingwell, Gordon Hogg suggested we assume that everybody is thinking in this reflective way, and asked what happens next. Dr. Kingwell made the argument that the basis of a just society is the dialogue among citizens itself. Justice isn't an end condition, though thinking about it that way is a common mistake.

Rather than being a picture of a perfect world, justice is the process of inclusive dialogue among citizens. In ideal terms, the only valid decision is the one made by all affected participants. This is a regulative ideal, meaning that even if we can never get to full and complete participation, this ideal is the star by which we steer. In most cases, decisions will have to be made because of pressures of time and circumstance by either representatives or subsets of the affected participants. Having a plebiscite on every piece of legislation would be a logistical nightmare, and more than that, the result would be a series of short-term self interest expressions which would not necessarily mean good government. Our mechanisms of representation were developed to deal with this.

Nevertheless, the ideal of validity is that everybody who is affected by a decision should be party to it, and that could regulate our actual decision making. The caveat is that full and complete participation has to be cashed out differently for those people who don't participate in the ways that we have normalized. Dr. Kingwell remarked that with individuals who can't make claims for themselves, or are maybe making claims that we can't understand, we have the task of constantly trying to reach across the gaps between one person and another.

A number of people commented on the importance and the difficulty of moving towards full inclusion. Several who are involved with people on the margins spoke about the tendency within power structures for decision making to exclude those effected. They said there is a need for policies that promote inclusion and give people a voice in decisions about services. A woman with experience in politics talked about how tricky it can be to bring the ideal of full and complete participation into play. She strongly endorsed the importance of doing this and urged the current government to reach for full consultation, but also warned that, "Sometimes, even with all our best efforts and best intentions in getting all the people involved, the decision gets made and it turns out not to be the best decision and we also have to allow for that to happen in our system."

Appropriately, Dr. Kingwell concluded by saying that even as the good life is the life spent seeking the good life, so the just society is a society that seeks justice among its citizens.