



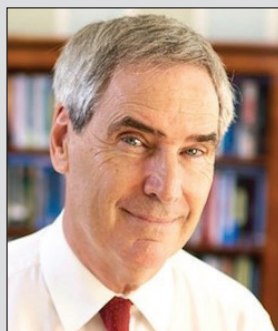
True North in  
Canadian public policy

# Straight Talk

December 2019

## *Straight Talk:* Michael Ignatieff

**Hungary's Viktor Orban represents a new kind of illiberal populist leader in Europe. Others have been elected in Poland, Czech Republic, and elsewhere. What does this mean for the future of liberal democracy in Europe and beyond? In this edition of MLI's *Straight Talk*, we spoke with one of Canada's leading public intellectuals, Michael Ignatieff, about the rising tide of populism in the world today. This publication is based on a transcript of a recent discussion between MLI Senior Fellow Marcus Kolga and Michael Ignatieff on an episode of MLI's Pod Bless Canada podcast.**



Born in Canada, educated at the University of Toronto and Harvard, **Michael Ignatieff** is a university professor, writer and former politician. His major publications are *The Needs of Strangers* (1984), *Scar Tissue* (1992), *Isaiah Berlin* (1998), *The Rights Revolution* (2000), *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (2001), *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* (2004), *Fire and Ashes: Success and Failure in Politics* (2013), and *The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World* (2017).

Between 2006 and 2011, he served as an MP in the Parliament of Canada and then as Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and Leader of the Official Opposition. He is a member of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and holds thirteen honorary degrees. Between 2012 and 2015 he served as Centennial Chair at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in New York. Between 2014 and 2016 he was Edward R. Murrow Chair of the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. He is currently the Rector and President of Central European University in Budapest.

*The author of this document has worked independently and is solely responsible for the views presented here. The opinions are not necessarily those of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, its Directors or Supporters.*

**MLI:** We are honoured to have with us today one of Canada's leading public intellectuals, a journalist, author, former leader of the Liberal Party and current Rector and President of the Central European University, Michael Ignatieff. Thank you for joining us.

**Last night, you delivered a lecture on European populism almost exactly 30 years to the date after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when democracy seemed to stride across the world, especially in Europe. Yet now we wonder how Viktor Orbán in Hungary transformed himself from a dissident student pro-democracy leader into one of Europe's leading populists. Far-right populists are gaining power in Europe and we are watching the final acts before Britain leaves the European Union. What happened?**

**Michael Ignatieff:** I think we are struggling to understand whether it's one story or a bunch of separate, discreet ones. What I do see in Hungary – because I work out of Budapest – is the arrival of a new normal that is very surprising. If you go to Budapest, you walk around and think “this is a free country.” You can stand up on a street corner and denounce Viktor Orbán, and the police aren't going to take you away. There are free media that you can buy or access online. There is a parliament. The surface reality of democracy is still there.

You have to look more carefully to see just how subverted, deformed, and neutered the institutions of democracy are: 85 percent of the media controlled by the government, the constitutional court with no capacity to check or control the executive, Parliament a total rubber stamp. Politics directed towards academic life forced my university literally out of the country. So, on the surface, it looks like a free society; the place is full of tourists, people love Budapest, but beneath the surface, you see a much more sinister development.

Orbán is a populist who has won four elections; he is not governing by political terror. He is governing with a democratic mandate using democracy to systematically eviscerate the institutions that limit his power. This is something new under the sun. And, getting back to your original question about what went wrong, this is something we never expected in 1989. We thought, very complacently, that after communism comes democracy; well after communism comes democracy, but nobody expected this kind of democracy: majoritarian democracy whose direction is towards the consolidation of a single party-state. And why did it happen?

It's very hard to sort out all the reasons. I think one of the big reasons is simply the return of history. If the Hungarians asked themselves “what do I want a political system for,” what they want is to protect Hungary and keep Hungary for Hungarians. So, the nationalism that Orbán has tapped into is very resonant in a small country with a particular language and a sense that they do not want to simply become Western Europeans; they want to defend what is specific about being Hungarian or Estonian or whatever. I think nationalism has surged back and politicians like Orbán have understood that that's what the population wants their political system to do for them; that is, to protect them against globalization, against the West, against anything that diminishes the specificity of being Hungarian. I think we shouldn't have been surprised, but that's how we got there.

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**MLI:** Does that threaten the sort of western liberal aura that we have built since the fall of communism? Is this an existential threat? Alarmists everywhere have been saying that this is the end and we need to fight back. Is this the end or can we make this work within the current order and especially within the EU? A lot of these countries are fighting back; they threaten to pull out of the EU. Is this a problem?

**Michael Ignatieff:** I'm not an alarmist; you know Hungary is a small country and I think Orban is an attractive model to every local would-be authoritarian. But he is in the EU and he is structurally dependent on subsidies from them. There are limits; he can't pull Hungary out the EU, so the EU operates as some kind of control on just how far he can go. I don't think we are looking at fascism in Hungary; I don't think we are looking at fascism in Poland. I hope we are not looking at fascism in Estonia.

No, these people want to have it both ways at once; they want to be part of a European community that nominally believes in democracy, but they want to have single-party control of their country. I don't think any of them are envisaging or taking us towards a break-up of the democratic order in Europe. I just don't see that happening. Now, maybe I'm whistling in the dark and too optimistic and history has made fools of us all and might well make a fool out of me, but I don't see that. I think it is sinister in its own right because I just wish – you know, I married a Hungarian, I'm very fond of Hungary – there could be more real freedom in place. But I don't think it's a threat to the international order.

**MLI:** Some people have compared the current situation in Europe to one that existed in the late 1930s. Would you say that's true?

**Michael Ignatieff:** I don't see that. We ran that movie, and it ended in disaster, death and extermination. I don't see that. I do see worrying kinds anti-Semitism, but I also see countermoves against that. I see in Slovakia a female human rights lawyer being elected President of the country. I see in Hungary a moderate, pragmatic, liberal, green politician elected as mayor of the country's biggest city, Budapest. I see very strong resistance to Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland. It didn't win the last election, but it has control of some of his cities. I see similar foment in the Czech Republic.

If we switched to Western Europe and look at Brexit, I think everybody is alarmist about Brexit in the wrong kind of way. This is a country having the most fundamental debate about its identity and future that I've seen a democratic society do in my lifetime. The institutions are holding together, it's a mess, but you know what – that's what democracy often is. I mean, we're Canadians here. We forget that we spent 30 years, from the 1960s though the 1990s, in the mess of the constitutional debate. Today, it's a dim and distant memory. We got through it. Somehow, we're still in one piece. Now we are looking at new challenges, western alienation and all that stuff.

I just think we need to think about liberal democracy as being built for crisis and built for conflict. That's what a democracy is. It's a system to moderate and keep things peaceful the fundamental arguments

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about our future. Canadians disagree about a lot of stuff and so they need a system so that we keep those disagreements civil. And in every society I look at, I see democracy actually being robustly effective at managing those conflicts.

You look at France, the *Gilets Jaune*, apart from disgraceful violence in Paris, this is a conflict from the bottom up from people saying, “if you change the speed limit on the country roads in France you are hitting my pocketbook. If you are putting up the price of gas, you are hitting my pocketbook. Stop treating us as if we didn’t exist.” That seems to me what democracy should respond to and President Macron has been forced to respond. Now, the violence apart, this seems to me a sign of a democracy doing what a democracy has to do, which is responding.

**MLI: So, you bring up Canada, which just had an election. There seem to be a rise in a new populist party led by Maxime Bernier. Maxime of course lost his seat. His party didn’t win a single seat. Is that a sign that democracy is working? Does it worry you that there is this rise of populism yellow-vests in Alberta, the western alienation, and Maxime Bernier? What does this all mean to Canada and is there something that we need to do?**

**Michael Ignatieff:** Much as I respect Maxime - I always thought he was a nice guy to be with in the House of Commons - I think his defeat is a very positive sign that there isn’t running room in this country for the kind of anti-multicultural, anti-immigration, American-style right-wing stuff. Our two-party system held together and pushed him off the edge of the political system. I think that’s basically a good result.

There’s a lot of western alienation, but this is just a permanent feature of a country that is as big as ours; few countries go through five time zones and regions as different as ours. The salient new feature of Canadian politics, which I think is extremely important, is that the green issues, the environmental issues, turn out to be deeply divisive regionally. Their divisiveness is not because Alberta is full of people who are climate deniers. Albertans whom I know understand exactly how serious the climate challenge is, but their damn lives depend on pumping fossil fuels out of the ground. So the problem that they encounter, and this is a lesson for all of us, is that we all take this green climate change as an imperative that puts an end to politics. No, this is where politics has to begin. We have to then sit down and reach agreement on the very difficult regional and class compromises that we’re going to have to make in order to save the planet that we all share.

But this pitch, workers and smoke stacking industries against people in the new economy, or energy consuming provinces against energy-producing provinces. We’ve got to have a whole new kind of politics that says, “okay, we all agree we want to save the planet, but this is the most divisive issue in Canadian politics frankly. How do we deal with it? Do we build a pipeline? How do we build a pipeline and meet our carbon targets?”

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But what I don't like – and I'm a kind of green guy – is the ways in which greens walk around saying, “well there is no politics to do here because it's just an imperative.” I'm sorry, you got to reach out to people whose lives are dependent on fossil fuel for their livelihood. You got to reach them and convince them and find a transition that works for them.

This is a hugely big issue. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge for the country because for us it's the national unity issue of our time. We have very robust political systems. When you stand outside of Canada – I work out of Canada – you can look back and see all the things that drive Canadians crazy: too many veto points, too much provincial power or too little provincial power; regional divisions; federal-provincial-municipal divisions; or the Aboriginal veto point, all of this you think, “we can't get anything done.” Well we've got a hell of a lot done as a country, but the veto points forces us to talk.

You can't do a pipeline unless you talk to Aboriginals. You may not like that, but folks that's Canada, right? You may not like having fossil fuels in Alberta, but we produce as much damn oil as Saudi Arabia, so get used to it. You know, that's the cold water down the back of a green. We've got to live with that. It's one country and we got to find a way to get the oil to tide water because our economy depends on it, and then we got to find a way to make sure we don't damage the climate irreparably. That's what the politics of our country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to have to be.

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The other issue is what do we do to prevent the seepage northward of a toxic political culture of enemies? Canada is too divided, language against language, Aboriginals against non-Aboriginals, regions against regions; we can't afford a politics of enemies in this country. It's too dangerous for us. They can play around with the politics of personal destruction, the politics of enemies south of the border, but we just can't do that – and I think there has to be a consensus in Canada that we are a country of adversaries. We are a country where we disagree. We disagree fundamentally about stuff, but there are no enemies in the House. That's terribly important for our politics, but I'm optimistic we can do that, because we all know that this place could blow apart. And, because it can blow apart, then we just can't go there because we love the country and we want to keep it together.

**MLI: I have been watching disinformation for the past decade, especially the Russian kind. We know that Russia has meddled in all sorts of elections. How do we push back against that?**

**Michael Ignatieff:** No question, it's sinister, it's new. But we're learning. We've only been in the social media world for 15-20 years. We are all on a learning curve. When we first opened our phones and this stuff began streaming, we thought, “oh that's interesting.” Now we are much more skeptical. There is a learning loop here which I think we ignored at our peril. We are very pessimistic at the moment about social media's negative effect, but people are getting smarter and smarter about the disinformation content inside. They are asking, “who sent me this? why am I getting this?” They are unsubscribing when they can.

We are pushing back. We are aware of enormous regularity challenges that exist now that we have these hugely powerful platforms that are having such an impact on our politics. We're aware that there is constant external interference in our electoral process, which is a new phenomenon and a sinister one, but I think an educated electorate gets savvy, gets smart, begins to work against the disinformation, and says, "okay, I've got to find some clean sources that I can trust." We're all doing that. I'm shedding stuff that I just know is messing with my brain and trying to find stuff that is semi-reliable.

We should not ignore the feedback loop that is educating us to be better and more skeptical consumers of social media and therefore more resistant to the kind of disinformation and manipulation that we're seeing. We're also shutting down from it because life is too short to spend your whole damn life on these machines.

I don't want to sound too optimistic, but I'm trying to push back against the pessimism because that pessimism leads us to ignore something positive. It makes government much more difficult; that is, the feedback loops are speeding up and are just instantaneous. The government makes an announcement at 9:00 in the morning that people really don't like; by 10:00 the government knows it. Fifty-years ago that just was not happening. The feedback loops were much slower. That forces governments and politicians to be more responsive and it's very difficult. It means that the initial response of politicians now is don't say anything, right, because you're going to get mugged on social media in a half-hour.

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Politicians have to learn because that sets up another feedback loop. The public starts saying, as I said in the last election, "why aren't politicians talking to us about anything serious?" Well, the reason they are not is some of these negative feedback loops with the social media. Eventually a politician will learn - "I'm gonna say what I think because I think that's how I differentiate myself from everybody else and I've got some clear messages that I'm going to use." People will flood to a politician who does that. So, let's not be pessimistic and fatalistic about these technologies. We're learning to live with them; we are changing the technologies as we live with them and that makes me long term optimistic about the impact of technology in our democracy.

**MLI: I'm sure you've been watching Russian influence in countries like Hungary, where there seems to be an alignment between Viktor Orban and Vladimir Putin. What's your take? Where is this going and where does this end?**

**Michael Ignatieff:** I'd push back a little bit. I think Russian influence in the election in the United States was at the margins. I don't think it was decisive. I think anybody says that that is what tipped it to Trump just doesn't understand election politics. I think it's at the margins in Hungary too, for a very good reason: the Russians invaded Hungary in 1956. The historical memory of Russia is extremely negative. That creates limits to just how close Orban can get to Putin.

Second, what power of attraction does the Putin regime have for the world? Precisely zero. Who is immigrating to Moscow because it's such a wonderful, free, entrepreneurial society that gives hope to its people? Absolutely no one. That's important. If you are in the Baltic States, you have a huge problem with constant Russian meddling with the domestic Russian-speaking population. You've got constant threats to the national sovereignty of these three Baltic countries, but you have no one in the Baltic State saying, "Russia is really a wonderful place, a fantastic model. I wish I could live there." I mean, native Baltic people think, "are you nuts?" if you said something like that.

The other thing I would say is, what is Mr. Putin's succession plan? Right. After Mr. Putin, what? These are the regimes with no future. Mr. Putin is in his late 60s, everybody sits around thinking, "what happens next." I mean, the regime will perpetuate, this structure will perpetuate itself, but it's a structure without a future and so the societies that have a future, that offer a future for people, are the real rivals and real competitors. I just don't see Russia as being a serious strategic rival to anybody. It is a society that appeals to no one. I have Russian origins, I love Russian culture, I love Russian language; that's not my point. The system attracts no one.

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**MLI: My old friend Boris Nemtsov used to say, you have to separate the Russian people and Russian culture from the Russian regime. They are two separate things.**

**Michael Ignatieff:** That's what I would say, exactly. Nemtsov was right. We remember him with respect and that's another story. Yes, it's a regime that kills people. They shot Nemtsov in broad daylight on a Moscow bridge. What is that? What more do you need to know about the regime after you see the photograph of Nemtsov's body on that bridge? That's what I'm saying.

Anybody who looks at this thinks that's not the regime I want. The authoritarians, the bad guys, yes, but any person who has tasted freedom doesn't want that. That's true in Hungary, that's true in the Czech Republic, that's true in Poland, that's true in the Baltic States, that's true anywhere. Yes, authoritarianism is on the ascendant, but authoritarianism has nothing to offer free societies. There is zero temptation. In the 1930s, Stalin and Hitler offered a temptation to democratic societies - where the trains appeared to run on time. It was a vigorous vision of the future; it was all propaganda, it was all sham. But this authoritarianism offers people nothing.

**MLI: But is there a threat? You spent three or four years fighting this regime who was trying to shut down the institution that you lead, and you were fighting it. You still have a presence in Budapest, but most are forced to move. Is this something that we need to wait out or is this something that we need to actively push back against?**

**Michael Ignatieff:** Oh, defiantly push back. My university has been in Budapest for 25 years and the regime decided for electoral reasons to make George Soros their campaign issue. And because our university was founded by Soros, they just basically forced us to open a campus in Ghana so we can teach our US degrees because we are not allowed to teach in Budapest. But we will stay in Budapest and we will continue to fight and continue to be in a sense the last man standing in terms of free institutions.

What has been disappointing and is a real object lesson is that Europe – European institutions and European countries – did a lot of talking about how shocked they are by this attack on academic freedom. But in terms of bringing that hammer down and forcing Orban to back down, they weren't there, and that's an object lesson. Europe talks about its values, but it only defends its interests. It only defends the single currency, the market, but it does not defend its values in central and eastern Europe at all. It has allowed serious degradation in the rule of law, serious degradation in academic freedoms – core principles of the European Union. They just let them go and that's an object lesson.

We should not put our face and trust in the European Union. It doesn't make me a Brexiteer by the way; these are just the facts of the matter and that means that institutions like mine have to fight for themselves and make friends wherever we can. We have gone to Vienna – and let's also be clear, there is a far-right party in Austria that doesn't want us there and the far edge of that party has real Neo-Nazi parts to it. So, I am trying to give you a very optimistic story about the future of democracy, but let's look clearly at some of the perils and obstacles and threats that are out there.

**MLI: Where does that leave Canada? If our allies are not standing up for our mutual values, our common values, if we have a partner to the south of us who is also fleeing from the same values, where do we go?**

**Michael Ignatieff:** I never seen Canada so alone in my lifetime. We built a foreign policy on a close relationship with the United States, we rode the rocket of American prosperity, and we thought our relationship was non-transactional, that is, it was a partnership of real blood brotherhood because we fought on the same side in three global conflicts. And we discovered it was perfectly transactional and it's not just Trump.

I think the United States has decided that globalization doesn't work for us anymore and therefore global free trade doesn't work for us anymore and NAFTA doesn't work for us anymore. That just changes everything about our relationship with the United States. But I'm afraid I think that's an enduring phenomenon. Long before Trump, there were blue dog Democrats saying, "I don't like NAFTA, I don't like this free trade with Canada," and so that is a real concern.

Europe, I think, is not a reliable geostrategic partner for Canada because Europe no longer has a common foreign policy. It's got 27 nation states and so Canada will have to play pickup basketball with the Nordics on one issue, then pick up basketball with a French on *francophonie* issues, then pickup basketball with the Germans on some other issue. That makes our foreign policy very complicated.

The problem is that we do a lot of virtue signaling, which is in a certain way cynical, although we weren't honest enough to admit it. We would denounce the treatment of woman in Saudi Arabia with the tweet and think we've done our job. Then suddenly Saudi Arabia takes it seriously and slams back at us and pulls their

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students out of Canadian universities. We discovered that virtue signaling has a price and cost. It exposed the emptiness of our virtue signaling in a way that I think gives us all a moment to reconsider. That's the negative side.

The positive side is that we are one of the four or five most admired countries in the world. We are one of the top destinations for immigration in the world. God gave us unbelievable natural resources and we have one of the most dynamic and growing populations in the world. The key challenge for Canada - this is kind of a Voltairean point - is make sure our democracy is as good as we say it is. Make sure our democracy, our domestic politics, is just crackerjack innovative. Instead of virtue signaling, we need to get, for example, green policy right and then show the world how a mature democracy adjudicates the conflicts that result when we have to make some really fundamental decisions about green policy. The minute Canada does that, the whole world will be tracking to our door to find out how we do it.

That's how we lead in the world. We get some of the big policy choices for the 21<sup>st</sup> century fixed in our country and then they will beat a path to our door. That's how we do it. We can no longer count on the North Atlantic alliance, we can no longer count on the Americans. We are much more alone in the world than in the past. We do not have the leverage to force China to release our hostages.

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We have got to wake up to the fact that we are actually a very small country in a big, harsh, destabilized world. This is not the world that I grew up in and the only response that makes sense to me is to make sure that our democracy is as strong and vital and innovative as we possibly can. That in turn means you have to have a vital innovative economy. You got to put the democracy and the economy together and then you become what we have been and keep being, which is an example to the world. We still are an example to the world. Less virtue signaling and just get our own house in order - that's what I feel we need to do.

**MLI: Thank you very much for joining me this morning to offer your thoughtful, insightful comments on the situation facing Europe and the United States, the threats and challenges facing democracy in today's world, and advice on how Canada can get its own house in order.**



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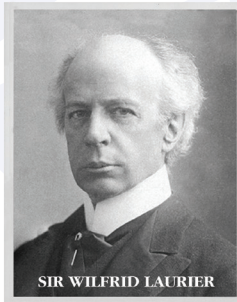
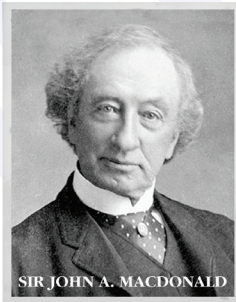
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