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Years later, Thatcher's rebuke still stings this Canadian Liberal

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My one conversation with Margaret Thatcher began with a chill in the air, and ended with our host mopping his brow. We were all polite, but there were daggers behind the smiles and venom coiled around the courtesy.

I had previously served as president of my university's student government, during a year dominated by an intensely bitter struggle with Mrs. Thatcher's successors. During those difficult days, my most stalwart ally had been Roy Jenkins, my university's chancellor and leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords. We met a year later in the Palace of Westminster to reminisce about our battles, which had left the Conservative government humbled and the secretary of state for education dismissed from Cabinet.

It was then that Mrs. Thatcher glided by.

Discovering that I was Canadian, she took a moment to speak glowingly of Brian Mulroney's foreign policies, and to express regret at his departure from office. I was unable to share her enthusiasm.

"Surely, only a very, very foolish person indeed would fail to see that Mr Mulroney raised your country's standing on the international stage," she said, in tones that dared me to declare my membership in the ranks of the fools.

We held each other's gaze for a moment.

"I think Canadians certainly feel a great sense of pride that he made Canada a leader in the international fight against Apartheid," I replied. "He stood up for human freedom, while others who had uttered its rhetoric stood aside."

Mrs. Thatcher warmed to the opportunity to give voice to her self-assurance. "To be a leader is to make difficult decisions. I was able to do so because there are things I believe in, things I am prepared to sacrifice for, things I am willing to be unpopular for," she replied. "If only your Liberal Party could say the same."

The news of Mrs. Thatcher's death, coming days before the Liberal Party of Canada chooses its new leader, brought her verdict back to me.

There is no denying that the Liberal Party's long association with domination made it a magnet for individuals drawn to power rather than to public service, a tool of Liberals of convenience rather than Liberals of conviction. The question that will confront its next leader is not whether the Liberal Party can rebuild its fabled political machine into one capable of waging an effective campaign; it is whether it can rediscover its ideals and return as a party deserving of our country's trust.

If it is to have any hope of doing so, it will need to find the courage to resist the lure of comforting self-deceptions and the seduction of recent polls.

The party's decline at successive elections was not due to some lapse in judgment by a rueful electorate that yearns to repent at the next opportunity. It was not a want of resources that can be remedied by a new crop of bagmen or ward heelers. It was not an absence of messianic personalities whose charisma could substitute for grassroots renewal.

The Liberal Party instead received a calculated rebuke from Canadians against the divisions and hubris they saw gnawing at it. It was dismissed by an electorate who concluded that the Liberal Party was no longer willing or able to deliver liberal policies or governance.

The irony is that the fundamental tenets of liberalism remain as resonant with Canadians today as during the Liberal Party's salad days. It is why, in an effort to capitalize on its electoral successes, the NDP continues to try to strip the word "socialist" from its constitution. It is why the Conservative Party leader describes himself as a "classical liberal". And it is why genuine liberalism has nothing to do with a compromise between the extremes of other parties.

The ideals of liberalism are founded upon a single article of faith: that liberty is the highest political good, and that as a result, the first duty of government is to seek the greatest liberty for the one that is compatible with liberty for all.

It insists that every right is balanced by a corresponding responsibility. It holds that election to office is not a licence to rule, but a contract to serve.

It believes in the equal dignity of all citizens and in equality of opportunity, but it rejects equality of outcome, insisting instead that people of unequal talent and industry should be allowed to reap as they sow.

It celebrates individual initiative and looks towards a vision of society as a meritocracy, and expects those who benefit the most from society to bear proportionately the greatest responsibility towards society.

Ultimately, liberalism holds that a nation is bound together by a social contract, because the interests of each individual are inextricably linked to the well being of every other member of society, making prosperity and social justice inseparable. Liberals know that in the long term, we will succeed or fail as a people, not just as individuals.

If it is to redeem itself, the Liberal Party must treat the upcoming leadership election as a means towards an end, and not an end in itself.

It is an opportunity to begin building a national institution on a foundation of genuine democratic accountability, rather than the rule of one person. It is a chance to start articulating a liberal vision for Canada in a world that Laurier could not have imagined. It is an invitation to offer tangible policies that speak to the values that define us as Canadians.

At the end of our conversation, Thatcher offered me a laugh that conveyed mockery rather than mirth. "Young man," she said, "what you believe in is liberalism. Semantics aside, it is unrelated to your Liberal Party."

After it has elected a new leader, the Liberal Party of Canada will have only two years to prove her wrong.

Akaash Maharaj served as the elected National Policy Chair of the Liberal Party of Canada and is currently the Executive Director of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption. His personal web site is www.Maharaj.org