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***What's Happened to Politics?***

By Bob Rae, Canada: Simon & Schuster, 2015. ISBN: 9781501103414

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In the newly released book, “*What's Happened to Politics?*” former politician Bob Rae sets out a critical analysis of the current state of Canadian politics. In this non-partisan examination of Canadian politics, Rae discusses the history of certain Canadian policies and practices and provides an in-depth critique of the inadequacies of present day politics and the overall political atmosphere in Canada. Rae provides a critical understanding of how the historical evolution of Canadian politics impacts current concerns and everyday life for ordinary Canadian citizens. Regardless of political affiliation, this is an essential book to read, as it reveals the impact that simplistic ideologies have on public policy issues, but it is especially relevant for social work students who will be encountering these ideologies in their future work. As the field of social services is heavily intertwined with Canadian politics and policies, and, especially, social policies, “*What's Happened to Politics?*” provides a comprehensive and succinct examination of how current issues in Canadian politics are impacting service delivery, administration, policy and everyday life in Canada.

Bob Rae presents his analysis of the shortcomings of Canada’s current political framework in six chapters, addressing 1) Canadian politics in general, 2) leadership, 3) policy, 4)

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Aboriginal peoples, 5) democracy in Canada, and 6) the role of Canadian politics in an international context. Rae argues that the current fractured state of Canadian politics is evidenced by a disengaged and distrustful population, an economy that works to concentrate wealth among the rich, and a health care system that is deficient. Overall, we are given an extensive account of the evolving history of Canadian politics, and how it is related to current issues in politics and practices. Rae also offers recommendations to revitalize our present-day political system.

In Chapter 1 we are given a brief, yet comprehensive, history of Canada's economy. The end of the Second World War was a hopeful period, when Canadians experienced full employment and a steady increase in the standard of living for average families. By the 1970s the Canadian government had increased its spending and taxes, and Canadians were experiencing high unemployment rates and rising interest rates as a result of free trade agreements. This lasted until the 1990s, when Canada experienced growth and then the financial crisis of 2008, in which Canadians faced the realities of a global economic crisis and forces outside their own control. Rae claims that the latter period led to our current situation wherein, despite economists' predictions of state stability and taxes being under control, many Canadians are now working from "paycheque to paycheque" (p. 6). Rae argues that this economic climate has negatively affected Canadian politics, claiming that political parties have become full-time businesses, as opposed to being concerned with real governance. This, in turn, has helped to create a fractured electorate, in which Canadians are divided and disengaged. In support of this claim, Rae highlights the extremely low turnout of young voters, reflecting their philosophy of "What's in it for me?" He argues that underpinning this philosophy are the dire realities faced by young Canadians, such as precarious work and high education costs. Another contributing

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factor to this fractured electorate is how political parties interact with voters, such as the Conservative Party's reliance on robo-calling, which results in an emphasis on the breadth of a party's reach as opposed to the depth of its conversation with citizens (p. 13). To address these realities, Rae calls on politicians to shift from speaking to Canadians to once again speaking with them (p. 17). Moreover, Rae critiques the power that lobbyists and interests groups have in influencing political decision makers and campaigns, which further impacts citizens' relationship with voting.

In Chapter 2, Rae assesses political leadership in Canada, beginning with historical examples of leaders who possessed a genuine ability to see what people needed, persuade them to share their vision, and enact a plan of action (p. 23). Rae highlights accomplishment of Sir John A. Macdonald, Pierre Trudeau, Jean Chrétien, and Brian Mulroney, all who have possessed these abilities and used them efficiently to shape their political goals. He proposes, for example, that Pierre Trudeau's success with constitutional reform was based on his capacity to stay firm and true to his intentions while compromising when needed in order for his vision to become a reality. In contrast, Obama's simplistic message to citizens, "Yes we can!" is an example of telling the public what it wants to hear during a time political leadership is caught between wanting a simplistic solution while facing complex conflicts. Rae also comments on opposing styles of leadership (i.e. Stephen Harper, seen as too stiff and dogmatic, if pragmatic, and Justin Trudeau, as charismatic and having done a commendable job of re-building the Liberal Party's base of support within the last two years). Rae concludes that while each political leader brings different strengths, political leadership is grounded in vision, persuasion, and successful implementation.

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In Chapter 3, Rae discusses public policy and the necessity for Canadians to recognize their obligations to other generations, as he states that decisions made in the present have consequences for younger generations, who will have to endure the future costs of our shortcomings. Rae asks some key questions: “What is the best approach to righting Canada’s economy and positioning it for long-term success?” and “How can we ensure that Canada improves its environmental sustainability to preserve our lands for future generations?” (p. 52). Rae challenges us to analyze the growth of inequality that threatens Canadian society, by adopting a stance towards social policy in which evidence and measurement should be the guide of formulating policy, not ideology or the self-interest (p. 56). He calls for us to address the gaps in affordable access to childcare and early childhood education, housing, drugs, homecare and post-secondary education. He argues that we must be willing to address the outcomes of these programs in order to allow for change to happen. He also speaks to the importance of re-addressing sustainable development in Canada. He makes multiple environmental policy suggestions – for example, that Canada must have a real industrial strategy with lower taxes for manufacturing and deeper incentives for research and innovation. He argues that this would provide a source of well-paying jobs for Canadians. Rae also addresses our healthcare system. While our healthcare system is accessible and timely, international comparisons show that it is far from perfect. Rae feels that mental health is our weakest link, arguing that in many places in Canada people are suffering from abuse, violence, depression, and loss - especially on First Nations reserves. These issues are clearly timely. Consider, for example, the state of emergency that was recently declared in the Attawapiskat First Nation, as 101 people from a population of 2,000 have attempted suicide within the last 7 months (Rutherford, 2016). Rae argues that by breaking taboos around mental health, we can make significant progress, although he fails to

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provide recommendations as to how this would play out during policy formulation. He concludes the chapter by stating that we cannot leave important decisions in the hands of Parliament, as citizen's input in policy formulation is essential.

In Chapter 4, Rae focuses on Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Here he provides an informative history between the relationship of settlers and Aboriginal peoples, treaty-making, and the jurisprudence created by the court system over several decades. He addresses the implications of colonialism, providing an example of the Attawapiskat First Nation, whose budget is mostly controlled by bureaucrats and politicians in Ottawa, who have the power to change or stop the troubling situation at any time; he sees this as a "classical colonial arrangement". In discussing land claims issues, Rae states that Aboriginal peoples have been left with little power in respect to their homelands; for example, they are denied their rightful share of revenue from major extraction projects on their traditional lands. To understand current day tensions, Rae states we need to look at the histories of treaties, specifically how and under which circumstances they were negotiated. In the example of Treaty 6, he tells of how the Federal government used the famine that was occurring to withhold emergency food rations from communities that did not sign the Treaty. Rae explores the implications of the discrepancies between what constitutes an agreement, and the fact that Aboriginal peoples' oral history and traditions were discredited as a valid part of treaty-making by the Canadian government. While Rae presents a concise history and discussion about the states' relationship with Aboriginal peoples, he fails to highlight how political legislation and practices, such as the *Indian Act* and the residential school system continue to shape the Canadian states' relationship with Aboriginal peoples to this very day.

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In Chapter 5 Rae discusses democracy, arguing that our democratic institutions and processes are not as transparent as they should be. He begins with an exposition of Canada's democratic system, as a system that had its beginnings with the signing of *Magna Carta* in 1215. He defines constitutional democracy as not merely the rule by public opinion, but also about respecting that the power of the people must be limited by what is fair, reasonable, legal, and constitutional. Moreover, he suggests that debate and democracy yield a grey area where political and legal jurisdictions overlap, as in the case of the discussion of the niqab, for example, and whether it can be worn in a citizenship swearing-in. According to Rae, a hallmark of the Canadian state has always been its federalist nature, which calls for political power to be shared among federal, provincial and municipal levels of government. While the belief is that the federal government holds the highest power, Rae argues that the Charter actually limits the powers of the federal government. Countless times the Supreme Court of Canada has reaffirmed that if Parliament or a provincial legislature is not ready to recognize individual rights, the courts will step in, not in the name of government, but for freedom and democracy. Another tension with respect to democracy, which Rae highlights, is the disproportionately high rates of incarceration for Aboriginal peoples. With his statement "Crime rates are falling, yet the numbers in jail are growing" (p. 103), Rae argues that political parties are not asking the right questions, as they are not questioning whether our policies are effective, but are rather concerned with political support and satisfying the need for moral condemnation of criminality. Rae argues that the way Parliament, itself, is portrayed to Canadians is flawed. While in the pursuit of populism, Canadians are told that elections are about selecting a Prime Minister, when really, they are about selecting a Parliament (p. 103). He also argues that discipline and power are often put in the hands of the Prime Minister, which has been an underlying trends in Canada's

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parliamentary system. For example, the Prime Minister will appoint a cabinet and have caucus discipline, with minimal overhead of his decisions. To address this, Rae calls for a government commitment of sharing power with the Parliament, such as suggesting that Senate appointment be less partisan, and more thoughtful. Overall, Rae argues that Canadians have a growing frustration with our democratic institutions. To overcome this dissatisfaction, our democratic processes must be transparent, well managed and clearly defined across all levels of governments.

In the final chapter, Rae addresses Canada's role within the international context, arguing that Canada has become a poseur, or "political game player" (p. 119). He argues that we must bring back our role in providing reasoned and thoughtful advice to political powers concerning the current dangers in the world. We are given historical examples of Canada's engaged and effective international relations such as Brian Mulroney's leadership within the Commonwealth in South Africa and Jean Chrétien's decision not to support the invasion of Iraq. In contrast, foreign policy became centralized in, and ideologically controlled by, the Prime Minister's office during the Reform Party's takeover of the Progressive Conservative Party and following its election as a minority government in 2006. Rae argues that Canada's international stance has changed such that terms like "equity" have become negative and a phrase such as "international law" is permitted while "international humanitarian law" is not. He highlights Canada's role in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, arguing that we cannot view this as a simple conflict between good and evil, in which our role is to pick a side. With this ideology, we abandon Canada's values and traditions of diplomacy and peacekeeping, which have been at the heart of Canadian international relations for decades. Moreover, given international issues today, including religious ones, Rae argues that Canada needs to ensure we are talking to each other so that we do

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not allow differences and extremism to grow. As a country of immigrants, Canada is home to the world's great religious faiths, and therefore there must be a willingness to have engagement and cooperation between all levels of government.

Rae emphasizes throughout that he did not write this book for the purposes of partisan propaganda. Rather, his intention was to discuss Canadian politics in a way that is grounded in an assessment of values, ideas, character, and leaders, rather than image, impressions, branding, and appeals to fear or hate. Rae successfully achieves a concise, yet informative, discussion of Canada's declining and flawed political arena while offering hope for its political and democratic future. While his suggestions may seem far-reaching at times, Rae provides provocative discussions and points to clear and concrete examples of historical and current day Canadian political realities, including the successes and failures of various political leaders, the ways their decisions and policies have shaped our political landscape. There is much in this book that deserves our careful attention.

### **References**

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