

Encounters with Ron Watts

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If Ron Watts were the protagonist of a major Russian novel—a bit of a stretch, admittedly, given his untortured temperament—I would be one of those minor characters who crops up from time to time, in chapter twelve, chapter twenty, chapter thirty-five and so on, always in different contexts. The threads running through our relations would be of a growing friendship, of our mutual interest in Queen's and federalism, and of the interesting ways lives unfold, coming together and moving apart, in a fairly small society. If there is any originality in my experience of Ron, it is that I have seen him in such varied circumstances and roles.

I am not a scholar—not of federalism nor of anything else, alas. I fear I may have let my former teacher down in that regard. Consequently, I cannot pretend to deliver a profound, original or even merely pedantic assessment of Ron's contribution to the study of federalism. Clearly he is one of the Great Men of the subject, arguably the Dean of Federalism Studies, but I leave it to others to marshal the evidence and embellish that argument.

My first encounter with Ron was in the early sixties, when I was an undergraduate pursuing political studies at Queen's, and he was a professor. The Queen's of those days looks, in retrospect, more like a liberal arts college than a major university. It did have faculties of medicine and law, but it was still an intimate institution, with a total student population of fewer than 5,000 when I left in 1967. That said, this small university loomed large in Canada and most particularly in such fields as Canadian studies, political science and economics. The politics department was remarkable and perhaps uniquely distinguished in its contribution to Canadian public life. In my time, it included three professors who eventually became Companions of the Order of Canada (Alec Corry, John Meisel and Ron). Flora MacDonald, also now a CC, had escaped the Tory battles around John Diefenbaker and found refuge as the departmental secretary—but of course she was much more, including a tutorial leader. The Dean of Law, Bill Lederman, an eventual OC, gave a seminar on

constitutional law for politics students. Ted Hodgetts, OC, was still there in my first two years, before his ill-judged defection to a lesser institution. And there were other exceptional teachers as well: of those who left marks on me, I'd mention Jock Gunn, Jack Grove, Hans Lovink, and Hugh Thorburn. The honours politics program was small—some twenty students—and class sizes were a fraction of those today. I remember at least two seminars in which we were fewer than ten. We students had easy access to our professors and occasionally saw them socially (though I don't remember addressing any of them by their first name in those years). Some of these acquaintances with professors matured into friendships that I have been lucky enough to enjoy for many years.

My first sure memory of Ron is of his fourth year seminar on comparative federalism. Ron had returned to Queen's in the early sixties after completing his thesis at Oxford. His book *New Federations: Experiments in the Commonwealth* had just been published by the Clarendon Press. He was a late-comer to political science, having started teaching at Queen's as a philosopher before deciding to switch disciplines and return to Oxford for his doctorate. The seminar was small, with lots of discussion. For me, it was illuminating because of its strong comparative dimension, including—because of Ron's field research—a close examination of post-colonial societies which had had very different experiences of federalism. Ron had studied under K.C. Wheare, who emphasized the institutional aspects of federalism, but his own approach was notably eclectic. He steered between the Scylla of Wheare's institutionalist approach to federalism and the Charybdis of W.S. Livingston's sociological approach. Ron was focused on whether political systems in practice functioned in a federal way and what forces and factors shaped them—including their historical development, societal and institutional structures, and parties and leaders. His interest in the new federations, a number of which failed, also led him to reflect deeply on the pathology of federations. A particular originality of Ron's course was that it cut across a wide spectrum of Western and developing countries, in contrast with many courses in comparative politics which were more focused on either Western, or communist, or developing countries. He used the focus on federalism as a prism for looking at how a kind of institutional arrangement played out in very different contexts.

Aside from the content of the course, I was struck by Ron's style. In fact, I think it was virtually identical to his style today. Even in the Age of Aquarius, he was always properly dressed in a donnish way. And though he

was only in his late thirties, he seemed older somehow, probably because of his exceptional maturity and soundness of judgment. (No doubt these qualities lay behind his becoming the youngest Principal ever at Queen's.) He was the least ideological or passionate of teachers. Calm reasonableness and balanced judgment prevailed. Despite, or perhaps because of, his strong philosophical background, he was wary of very abstract political science: facts and the complexity of different countries were foremost (he had spent time in each of the new federations on which he wrote). He advanced concepts and taxonomies to aid understanding, but he came to generalizations cautiously and eschewed ambitious theory. He used the comparative method as a kind of laboratory of interesting specimens where hypotheses could be tested. I might not have appreciated that as much then as I came to later because I was very caught up at the time in systems theory (though my undergraduate thesis on David Easton came down on the deeply sceptical side). Of course, he was not completely immune to enthusiasms: at the time he was rather seduced by the charms of the German Bundesrat, thinking it might fit Canada's needs; he has since changed his mind on this.

The Politics department hoped I would win a Woodrow Wilson fellowship and go off to Yale or one of the leading American universities. I let them down badly. I had not even started on my thesis when I went for my interview, which did not seem to impress the selection jury as it probed for thoughts that I had not yet formed. A few days after the bad news arrived I encountered Ron in the lower level of the Student Union. He expressed his regrets about the Wilson and asked if I had ever thought about Oxford. I had not, but was thrilled by the idea. So Ron set to work. His plan was to get me into Nuffield College, where he had done his doctorate, and which would provide a full scholarship. However, Nuffield would not make a final commitment until they had interviewed me, which would not happen until I arrived in September. So Ron spoke with his great friend, Christopher Seton-Watson at Oriel, to arrange a place there as a potential fall-back. Fortunately, by this time I had done my thesis and graduated honourably so things worked out at Nuffield. (My academic career there was what Oxonians might call an Alpha-Gamma experience, but I'll pass on that for now.)

Unexpectedly, all this put Ron in the unlikely, and unknowing, role of Cupid. For it was at Oxford that I met Charlotte Gray, who became—after a long friendship and eventual courtship—my wife and the mother of our three sons. Thus the Fates and Ron lined up to steer me towards the best and

happiest decision of my life. Often teachers have no idea what impact they have on their students. I am glad to report that Ron approves of my choice: he stood, with John Meisel, as one of Charlotte's two sponsors when she was recently hooded with an honorary doctorate at Queen's.

After Oxford, I took a job with the federal government in Ottawa "for a year or two". I still thought I might eventually teach at a university. I had worked in a few departments by 1977, when I was recruited into the so-called "Tellier Group" that had been set up in the Privy Council Office to advise the government on dealing with the newly elected Parti Québécois government and a possible a referendum on sovereignty-association. An early initiative was the creation of the Pépin-Robarts Commission, which Ron joined as a commissioner the following year. Prime Minister Trudeau had grave reservations about the commission, even as he set it up, because he did not want to confront a long list of proposed changes to the structure of the country that he might not support or be able to deliver. In fact, I saw relatively little of Ron during this period, but it is probably fair to say that we came at the national unity issue from different angles as the great drama unfolded through constitutional rounds, elections and referendums.

Ron's writing, even recently, tends to give great weight to what he calls the "structural problems" of Canadian federalism. Like many in the political science community in Canada, he has seen some aspects of our constitutional arrangements as dysfunctional. This led him to support major constitutional change in the Pépin-Robarts Report and in the Meech and Charlottetown rounds. My own optic has been shaped from working within PCO on unity scenarios and strategies in the late seventies. While I recognized structural tensions in Canadian federalism, I was not convinced that they were necessarily much worse than those in some other federations or would be cured by various proposed constitutional solutions. It was hard to see how to rally the PQ to any "Canadian" solution, but their continued opposition would undermine the value of whatever was accomplished. Moreover, addressing some of the structural issues—such as the Senate and the spending power—risked pitting regions against one another. Many constitutional innovations would bring their own problems. In the contest over national unity, I thought it might be easier to wear down the credibility of independence through incremental change and reasoned argument than to win a clear constitutional victory for Canada. In the end, this has made me reluctant about the major constitutional initiatives of the last twenty-five years. I supported none of them with enthusiasm, because I always had

reservations about process (1981) or substance (Meech and Charlottetown). Ron was probably keener on the structural reforms in Meech and Charlottetown. In retrospect, it is hard to say who was right or wrong about what because the story has had so many surprising twists. Ron, in his post-mortem of the Charlottetown Accord, asked whether Canadians are now “inoculated from the disease of wanting to solve all structural problems by means of constitutional change”.

In fact, I was not professionally involved in the great dramas of Meech and Charlottetown (and only peripherally in patriation). The next time I seriously engaged with Ron was after I became Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Relations in 1996. This was in the wake of the near-death experience of the Quebec referendum the previous year. By then, for better or for worse, we were in a world of incremental, non-constitutional change as well as the debate around the rules of secession and the need for “clarity”. My Minister was Stéphane Dion, very much the former professor of political science, who was voracious in his demand for facts and arguments about Canadian federalism, including comparisons with other federations. This led to my Medici moment, my becoming the unlikely patron of one of Ron’s great successes. I phoned to propose that we commission him to write a short book, no more than one hundred pages, putting Canadian federalism in comparative perspective. We would have no editorial control and the book would be published by the Institute at Queen’s. Our idea was that such a book could be useful in addressing a number of myths around Canadian federalism. The result was *Comparing Federal Systems*. The book is a classic: a major best seller, a third edition in preparation, translated into French, Spanish, Arabic, Ukrainian and Kurdish. It was such a success that I went back to Ron and asked for a second short book, which became *The Spending Power in Federal Systems*, an equally masterly product, though on a much narrower subject. The success of these volumes should be an inspiration to scholars at the top of their game of the advantages in publishing *short* books, even though it is very challenging to do well.

In 1998, I called Ron on another project. In the same spirit of opening the Canadian debate to experiences of other federations, we were thinking of holding a major international conference on federalism and sponsoring an organization to promote an international network on federalism. We wanted him to join a small committee to explore the idea. So began what became the Forum of Federations. Ron has been central to the creation and

development of the Forum and he has given an incredible amount of time to it. I saw a fair bit of Ron in the Forum's earliest days leading up to the Mont Tremblant conference, but I have come fully to appreciate not just his dedication but his skills and knowledge only since I was selected (by a jury including Ron) to become President of the organization in 2005. He is the committee man *sans pareil*, always totally prepared, clear on the outcomes desired, attentive to all views and punctilious. At one stage, he was chairing not only our program committee, but also covering off our finance and investment committees. (Not many know that Ron spent a year training to be an accountant. It shows in his committee work.) He has been on the editorial board of the Global Dialogue program from day one and arranged our marriage for that program with the International Association of Centres of Federal Studies. Whenever we are concerned that we may have a problem with clashing egos—often academic egos from around the world—we wheel in Ron to smooth things over and produce a coherent result. He has traveled ceaselessly for us, often to difficult environments. Wherever he goes, business comes first, so he often sees little beyond the walls of a hotel. Too often, his tourism is largely vicarious—experienced through the reports his beloved Donna brings back of her explorations while he has been in meetings. For a long time Ron reviewed every article in our magazine for content. He is always quick to comment on drafts of anything sent to him. Most recently, he has helped to shape and bring order to the Fourth International Conference on Federalism planned for Delhi in November 2007, as he did for the previous three conferences. He can be tough when necessary: for example, he categorized the draft papers for Delhi into four lots, namely “outstanding, good, salvageable, and beyond hope”; appropriate action followed. Through all of this I have never seen him complain, ruffled or even remotely rude. Finally, Ron was the most assiduous reviewer of drafts of a little book on federalism that I have recently authored and he was unstintingly generous with comments and corrections.

Finally, let me finish where I started—at Queen's. I have been on its board for a number of years and have benefited from Ron's perceptions and careful judgments on a number of occasions. At the same time, even twenty years after stepping down as Principal, he has always shown the greatest discretion and supportive deference towards his successors. We had a particularly happy occasion last year, when a new student residence was designated Watts Hall.

So you can see that it has been my good fortune to know Ron Watts first as my teacher, but in turn as my mentor, my client, my boss and my advisor. It is a measure of the man that with every step he became, more and more, my friend.