

The Decline of Civil Society:
How Come? So What?

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The John L. Manion Lecture
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Introduction

*Dr. Janet Smith
Principal
Canadian Centre for Management Development*

Guests, Colleagues, Mesdames et Messieurs,

As Principal of the Canadian Centre for Management Development it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the sixth John L. Manion Lecture, an annual event named in honour of CCMD's first Principal. The Manion Lecture provides an excellent opportunity for CCMD to invite a distinguished scholar or practitioner to speak to a mixed audience of leading Canadian scholars and public service managers.

In a time of rapid change, our institutions are continuously challenged to adapt and learn. To do so we need to draw upon the best ideas in the world today, and to build on the experience and insights from many communities. For this reason, the gathering this evening includes public service managers, leading members of the academic community and guests from other areas, including the private sector. We hope that you will take the opportunity over dinner to share your own perceptions and experiences of current public management challenges and exchange thoughts

on this evening's lecture. This is an important part of this event, and one of the reasons for it.

The Manion Lecture is held in conjunction with CCMD's annual University Seminar, which brings together some fifty scholars in the fields of management, public administration and political science from universities across the country. This seminar offers participants an opportunity to learn about recent developments within the federal public service and to engage in dialogue and exchange with each other and with senior public servants.

Our speaker tonight is Robert D. Putnam of Harvard University, one of the world's leading scholars of government who has become celebrated in recent years for his analysis of "social capital" and civic engagement. In his writings he draws attention to the weakening ties between citizens, and between citizens and their governments, in all developed countries. His research explores the connections between the bonds of civic life and strong, effective public institutions. It helps us to understand the role governments can play in building the "social capital" needed to sustain democratic and effective government and a good life for all citizens.

Robert Putnam is Clarence Dillon Professor of International Affairs and Director of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University,* where he served previously as Chairman of Harvard's Department of Government and as Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is the author of more than thirty scholarly articles and seven books, including *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, lauded by the *New York Times* and praised by *The Economist* as "a great work of social science, worthy to rank beside de Tocqueville, Pareto and Weber." Recently, Professor Putnam chaired a task force for the Trilateral Commission on "Revitalizing Democracy" which addressed the widespread problem of discontent with the workings of political

* Professor Putnam no longer serves in these capacities, having recently been appointed Stanfield Professor of International Peace.

systems in democracies and the loss of public trust in politicians, leaders and institutions.

We are honoured that Robert Putnam accepted our invitation to deliver the sixth Manion Lecture, and on behalf of the Public Service of Canada it gives me great pleasure to present him to this audience of distinguished practitioners and researchers.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Professor Robert Putnam.

The Decline of Civil Society: How Corne? So What?

Robert D. Putnam

It is a great pleasure to be here and an honour to be asked to deliver the 1996 John L. Manion Lecture.¹ This evening I want to share a mystery with you, a detective story that I have been working on for the last several years. Please forgive me, though, if I begin with a brief autobiographical note which will help to explain how I came to this evening's topic.

Several years ago I was engaged in a very academic study of a very obscure topic — the character, quality, and performance of local government in Italy. Over a twenty-year period, with a number of colleagues, I measured the effectiveness of different regional

¹ This Lecture draws on material first reported in the following articles by Dr. Putnam: "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, no. 1 (January 1995), pp. 65-78; and "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," in *P.S.: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 28, no. 4 (December 1995), pp. 1-20.

governments. As a political scientist I am interested in why some governments work better than others. If you are a botanist and want to study plant development, you might take genetically identical seeds and plant them in different pots of soil, then water them differently to see how they grow and how their growth is a function of their physical environment. If you are a political scientist and you want to study the development of public institutions, you would take the same paper organization and set it in different social, economic and cultural contexts to see how the institution is influenced by its environment. Normally, political science is not an experimental science, so it is not possible for political scientists to do this kind of research.

Yet in 1970 the Italians laid the basis for this kind of research by creating an entirely new set of regional governments across the peninsula of Italy. These governments all had the same powers on paper and looked essentially identical. They all had substantial resources. (They all now spend approximately ten percent of the GNP of Italy, about the same level as the American states.) So these were potentially quite powerful, quite important, institutions. They were genetically identical because they all looked the same on paper, but the pots of soil — the regions into which they were introduced — were quite different. Some of them were quite wealthy and economically advanced, some were quite backward, some were Catholic, some were controlled by Communists. The research question was simple: What happened to these genetically identical institutions as they developed in these different contexts?

For twenty years my colleagues and I very carefully explored the performance of these governments. We examined their budgets; we explored their administrative arrangements and administrative efficiency; we counted the number of day-care centres or irrigation projects they produced; we measured their “street-level” responsiveness to Citizen inquiries.

We discovered that some of these regional governments were, and are, quite efficient and effective, but others were, and are, clear disasters. I have never had the pleasure of experiencing the efficiency of Canadian government, but I do have experience of

the government of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and I can assure you that many of these Italian regional governments are much more efficient, much more effective, creative and innovative than the government of Massachusetts. Still others are disasters — corrupt, inefficient, never answer their mail. So the questions were: Why is this so? Why do some governments work better than others? What were the secret ingredients, the secret elements, in the soil!

We had lots of ideas. We thought it might be that richer, more economically advanced regions could afford better governments. We thought it might be related to education. (It's a conceit of educators to think that maybe we make a difference.) We thought it might be related to the political party system. We had lots of ideas, many hypotheses. We did not, however, guess what turned out to be the best predictors of government performance — choral societies and football clubs! And rotary clubs, and reading groups, and hiking clubs, and so on! That is, some of these communities had dense networks of civic engagement. People were connected with one another and with their government. It wasn't simply that they were more apt to vote in regions with high-performance governments, but that they were connected horizontally with one another in a dense fabric of civic life.

A norm of reciprocity had evolved in these regions, the type of reciprocity that makes a community work and, of course, also makes governments work much more effectively and efficiently. These regions had this dense civic fabric, this tradition, this habit of connecting with one's neighbours and with community institutions. These regions were also wealthier, more economically advanced. For a long time we thought this was so because *wealth* produced choral societies. We conjectured that people in economically advanced, more affluent places could afford to take the time to become engaged in community affairs, while the poor sickly peasants didn't have much opportunity to join a choral society. We thought wealth produced choral societies.

We had it, however, exactly backwards. It was not wealth that had produced choral societies, it was — at least in the Italian case —

the choral societies that had produced wealth. That is, two identical regions one hundred years ago were equally backward, but one happened to have a tradition of civic engagement and it became wealthier and wealthier. We discovered to our amazement that this pattern of civic connectedness was a crucial ingredient, not only in explaining why some institutions work better than others, but also, at least partly, in explaining levels of economic well-being.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

I want to introduce here some social science jargon, for which I apologize but which may be helpful in our subsequent discussion — *social capital*. We all know what *physical capital* is — it is some physical object that makes you more productive than you would be if you didn't have it. A screwdriver, for instance. You save up your nickels and dimes and you invest in a screwdriver so that you can repair more bicycles more quickly than you could without the screwdriver. That is physical capital. Then, about twenty years ago, economists began talking about *human capital* to refer to an analogy between a screwdriver and a degree from the University of Toronto. If you save up your money and go to college or to auto mechanics school, you can be more productive and more efficient than you would be if you lacked that training. That is human capital.

Now we are talking about *social capital* to refer to the features in our community life that make us more productive — a high level of engagement, trust, and reciprocity. If you are fortunate enough to live or work in a community or an organization like that, you can be more productive than you would be in a different context. This kind of social capital turned out to be crucial, at least in part, in explaining economic development, institutional performance, and so on. And that is the end of my preface. The question was why some governments work better than others, and the answer was choral societies — that is, social capital.

THE DECLINE IN TRUST

When I finished the research in Italy several years ago and came back to the United States, I began to worry, as a Citizen, about a problem that concerns most people in the United States now — a sense that our institutions are not working as well as they once did. There are many metrics of this, many measures. One convenient measure is the answer to the pollsters' question that has been asked for thirty or forty years: Do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right most of the time?

When I was growing up in the fifties and sixties, if you asked Americans if they trust the government to do what is right most of the time, 73 percent would have said yes. That answer now seems antique. Last year, to the same question, about 20 percent of Americans said that they trust the government to do what is right most of the time. And that reflects a steady thirty-year decline, not linked to any particular administration or any particular party.

Trust has been down under Democrats and under Republicans, in periods of prosperity as well as in periods of economic hard times. And it is not only distrust of government that has grown, and certainly not just the federal government. It is also a distrust of state and local government, a distrust and lack of appreciation, lack of approval, of the performance of most of the institutions in our society. Trust in business is down, trust in churches is down, trust in medicine is down. Trust in — I am sorry to have to say this — trust in universities is down. We have this feeling that none of our institutions is working as well as it did twenty or thirty years ago.

The degree of this decline in confidence in public institutions is greater in the United States than in any of the advanced industrial democracies, at least to my knowledge. And the length of time during which this decline has occurred is greatest in the United States, but there are many other advanced industrial countries with similar trends. Everyone in the room is more expert on Canadian politics and government than I am, but I have the

impression that there has been a similar decline, not so deep, more modest (that is the Canadian way of doing things)— but still the trend is here. I am not talking about this particular government, but about a general sense that civic institutions are no longer working as well. The trends are down in Sweden, in Japan, in Italy, in Britain, and in many of the advanced industrial countries.

THE DECLINE IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

This evening I will focus on the United States because this is the case I know best, and it is where I have done my research. I began to wonder whether there could be a connection between this problem that worries me as a Citizen — the performance of our institutions — and what I have been studying as a scholar, namely social capital. So several years ago I began investigating trends in social capital, trends in civic engagement in the United States over the past twenty or thirty years. What I found at first surprised me and then, increasingly, distressed me — and now, frankly, it has become a matter of grave concern to me.

What I found is that over this period there has been a substantial decline in many forms of civic engagement in the United States. The simplest example, and the one most familiar to Americans, is that we are voting less, about 25 percent less, than we were a generation ago. But this decline turns out to be relatively more modest than some of the other metrics of civic engagement, and it is certainly not the most important one. I mention it only because it is the most visible. There are other examples within the domain of politics and government. Pollsters, for instance, have been asking Americans every year for the last twenty or twenty-five years if they have been to any meeting within the last year at which there has been a discussion of town or school affairs. The results show a decline in this type of civic engagement of nearly 40 percent over the last twenty years. And there are similar declines in other measures of civic deliberation. We are not just voting less, we are exchanging ideas with one another less about public affairs.

What I want to emphasize most is that this decline is not only true of politics — we Americans are connecting with one another and with our communities much less in many other spheres. Consider, for a moment, participation in community organizations. In the United States, the most common and most important of these are religious organizations. Since roughly half of all community activity in America is religious — roughly half of all memberships are religious, roughly half of all philanthropy is religious, and roughly half of all volunteering is in a religious context — the trends in American religious activity and religious behaviour cantell us a great deal. Depending to some extent on what measures are used, there is evidence of a decline of about 20 percent, perhaps even 25 percent, in the number of Americans, for example, who say that they went to church last Sunday.

I want to pause here for just a second to report on a rather unkind recent sociological study in which pollsters asked people the standard question, Did you go to church last Sunday? and then went to see whether those who said yes were actually in the pews. I have two unfortunate things to report. First of all, we fib a lot about whether we went to church. Roughly twice as many of us say we were there as actually were. And there is also some evidence that we are fibbing more than our parents did. So these poll numbers, if anything, underestimate the degree to which there has been a decline in attendance at church, but not in every single congregation or in every denomination. Some have been gaining, some have been declining. Evangelical religion has been growing over this period, but not enough to offset the really catastrophiccollapse in attendance at the mainline religious organizations — Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Catholic as well. The decline in participation in religious organizations has been significant.

This is true also of trade unions. A generation ago the most important kind of affiliation for many working-class Americans, especially working-class men, was membership in trade unions. However, membership in trade unions is off by about 50 percent,

or perhaps close to 60 percent, over this period. Thus, we are not going to church or the union lodge as often as we did in the past.

There are similar trends in many other kinds of civic organizations. Take, for example, what I have come to call the “animal” clubs — men’s organizations. This is not a slur; it reflects the fact that I have discovered in the course of doing this research that most American men’s clubs are named for animals — the Lions Club, the Moose Club, the Elks Club and the Eagles Club — and, of course, there are a few others like the Masons. All of these groups have experienced a decline of between 20 and 50 percent in membership over this period. In fact, the trend over this whole Century is quite interesting. Over most of the Century, it appears, rising numbers of American men belonged to such organizations (and the same pattern applies to women’s organizations). More American men, proportionately, apparently belonged to “animal” clubs in 1960 than in 1950, and more in 1950 than in 1940. This was the trend over the whole of this Century until suddenly, silently, inexplicably, all of them began to experience plateauing, followed by a steadily and then more rapidly declining membership over the last 20 to 25 years. There are other examples as well: volunteering for the Red Cross is off by more than 50 percent over this same period, and there are similar declines in adult volunteers for Boy Scouts and other community organizations.

BOWLING CLOSE: THE DECLINE IN “CONNECTEDNESS”

In many ways, therefore, we are connecting less. This does not mean, of course, that every single organization in America has lost members. That is not true. To take one example, membership in professional organizations has risen substantially, though hardly more than the number of Americans in professional and higher managerial jobs, so the “density” of such membership in the relevant portion of the population has not grown. On the other hand, some organizations have boomed. I happen to belong to the most rapidly expanding organization in America, one that has gone, over the same period, from about 300 thousand to 34 million

members. This organization is called the AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons. I belong to this organization because when you turn fifty in America, and if you have a driver's licence, you get a letter in the mail asking you if would you like to join the AARP. Thinking that I might get a discount at motels or something, I signed up for the AARP, and I am an active member in good standing. My total membership activity each year consists in the 36 seconds that it takes to write a cheque for eight dollars, and then I flip through the pages of *Modern Maturity* magazine!

This is the general rule. Organizations in which membership means moving a pen, writing a cheque, are exploding. Organizations in which membership means being there, knowing another member, are stagnant or declining. (I don't know any other member of the AARP even though there are 34 million of us. Actuarially, I must know another member, of course, but I wouldn't know that I know another member because we never meet.) It is not that there are no lobbies — there are important big lobbies that have grown during this period. But the organizations in which you commit with other people are the ones that have experienced a decline in connectedness.

Here is some evidence that I hope will knock your socks off — membership in bowling leagues has dropped! (I can see that it didn't. Well, that is because you don't realize how important bowling is in America.) Bowling is big in America. More Americans bowled last year than voted last year. And bowling is up, up by 10 percent over this last decade or so. But bowling leagues, bowling with teams, is off by 40 percent over the same period. You will wonder how a professor knows such strange facts. The answer is that I happened to run into the man who owns one of the largest chains of bowling alleys in America who said, "You know, Professor Putnam, you happened on a major economic problem in our industry." It turns out that if you bowl in a league, a team, you drink four times as much beer and you eat four times as many pretzels — the money in bowling is made in beer and pretzels, not in balls and shoes. So this man is very much worried about the decline in league bowling, even though the numbers of people

coming in the door are the same, or actually up. He is worried about the decline in league bowling because of the bottom line.

I, also, am worried about the decline in league bowling, and to explain why, I need to describe how team bowling works. If you bowl in a league in the United States, there are two teams with five people in a team — ten people. At any given time, two people are at the lane bowling and the other eight are sitting in a semi-circle of benches at the back of the lanes drinking their beer, eating their pretzels, and talking. They are mainly talking about whether O.J. did it, but occasionally they talk about bond issues, or whether the garbage is being picked up properly, or how the local schools are performing. What I mean — and this is why I use bowling teams as a serious example — is that this is yet another occasion that we once had, but no longer have, for sustained conversation with other people we know well about shared interests and community affairs.

This is not to say that we are not talking about politics in America. We are *shouting* about politics in America! We have this talk radio plague (I hope it hasn't arrived in Canada) in which a caller says, "Hi, I'm Ted from Toledo..." and then he goes on. I don't know Ted, I don't even know whether Ted *is* Ted, and I don't know if he is taking responsibility for his views in the way that my bowling league partner is. If you and I see each other every two weeks at the bowling alley and you say something crazy, you are taking responsibility for your views because you have to come back and face me again next week. This is fundamentally what has been happening to American democracy: we are less and less able to have serious discussions with people we know well. I don't mean highbrow academic discussions, I just mean having conversations with your neighbours about how things are going. I mean taking responsibility for your views. This is what this decline in social capital means. It is not just in a formal context, and it is not just in bowling leagues, or churches, or unions. It is a decline in informal connections.

This absence of civic conversation is characteristic not only of formal organizations but also of informal ties. For example, over

the last thirty years American sociologists have asked people to keep a time budget of how they spend every minute of a particular day (so many minutes brushing their teeth, and so on). Therefore, we know how Americans have been spending their time over these thirty years and how this has been changing. In fact, the pattern has remained pretty constant. We spend about exactly the same number of minutes on most of our activities, such as commuting, as people did thirty years ago. This is somewhat surprising, but despite all the gains in technology, the number of hours spent commuting seems to have been constant for most of the Century.

Against this pattern of basic consistency over time in how we spend our day is the fact that we are spending about 25 percent less time in ordinary conversation with other people and about 50 percent less time than we did thirty years ago in organizational meetings. And we know our neighbours less well. Over the past twenty or twenty-five years the number of people who say they never spend a social evening with a neighbour has doubled. It is not only in voting, it is not only in politics, it is not even only in a formal organizational context. It is in many different ways that we are no longer connecting with one another.

Furthermore — and this is in some sense the crux of the matter — we trust one another less. A generation ago if you asked Americans if they trust other people, nearly two thirds would have said yes. Today, if you asked that same question of Americans, nearly two thirds would say no. We are losing those habits of reciprocity and trust that are characteristic of communities with high levels of social capital.

SEARCHING FOR AN EXPLANATION

The best predictor that people will become engaged in their communities is their level of education. More education means more engagement. Over this thirty-year period we have had a massive increase in the average education levels of the American public as more people have gone to college, yet over exactly the same period

we have dropped out. We have disconnected from our neighbours and from our community organizations. Why? This is not some kind of natural sociological trend that has been going on for the last one hundred, two hundred or five hundred years — it has been happening in my lifetime, in our lifetimes. What might have caused this trend?’

Demographic Factors

Dual income families may have separated us as large numbers of women move into the labour force. But I have to be careful when I discuss this hypothesis: our mothers were doing a lot of social capital building (that is jargon for taking the kids to the Little League). Our wives and daughters are working to help with the family income and for their own professional satisfaction, but nobody is carrying out the tasks that our mothers did. That, at least, is the hypothesis.

The evidence on the issue of women in the labour force is mixed. It is true that the declines in civic engagement are slightly greater among women than among men, but they are greatest among women who do not work outside the home. The category of Americans in which the decline has been greatest is that of “traditional moms” — married mothers who are not working outside the home. A generation ago, more than three quarters of such women belonged to the PTA; now the figure is less than half. In fact, the level of civic engagement is now slightly higher among women who are working outside the home than among those who stay at home. None of this is evidence from a controlled experiment. We can’t be completely sure whether the women who a generation

² [Editor’s Note: The following portion of the Lecture is based on a dialogue with the audience about possible sources of the decline in civic engagement.]

ago would have been the joiners were disproportionately the women who went into the labour force, but it is certainly possible that the most civically inclined women have moved into the labour force, thus raising the level of civic activity among the employed female population and leaving behind those who are less likely to be engaged. It is a complicated question.

The trends, by the way, are down among men too. You could, of course, assume that this is because the men are picking up the slack at home, leaving less time for the animal clubs. I don't know about Canada, but this is not true in the United States. All the evidence suggests that men are not picking up the slack.

Divorce and other changes in the family structure might also have played a role. It is certainly true that the divorce rate has gone up and the number of people living alone has also increased quite substantially. It is statistically true that people who live alone are less likely to be connected to other people and are actually less likely to trust other people. This set of changes in the family structure is very likely an important contributor to the decline in community involvement.

Economic Factors

How about economic trends? Well, one key fact is that civic engagement is down at every level of the income hierarchy. The trends are down among rich folks, down among poor folks and down among the middle class. Indeed, one of the most striking things about this pattern of findings is that the trends are down in all parts of America. These various measures of civic engagement are down among highly educated people and they are down among high school dropouts; they are down at all levels of the educational and income and social hierarchy; they are down among blacks and down among whites; they are down on the east coast, down on the west coast, and down in middle America. This does not mean that each of these groups has the same absolute level of engagement — it means that the trends are down in each of them.

Age Factors

Indeed, there is only one exception, one set of categories, in which the trends are quite different, and that is age. Let us imagine that we line up all American adults according to their year of birth. At one end are the people who were born in the last years of the nineteenth century. Then there are the people who were born in the first years of this century, those born in 1910, 1920 and in the 1930s, the 1940s, the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s.

As we move along this line we ask each person a set of questions designed to measure their level of civic engagement — Did you vote last time? Do you read a newspaper? How many groups do you belong to? Do you trust other people? — all those measures of social capital. And what we find is that as we move along the line, beginning with birth dates at the end of the last Century and in the first years of this century, the levels of civic engagement are quite high and unevenly rising — until we get to the people who were born in the early 1930s, when they are down a little bit, and for the next *forty years* of birth cohorts there is a steady, dramatic drop. By the time we get to the people who were born in the 1970s and who are just now coming of age, the average level of civic engagement is dramatically less than the level of civic engagement among their grandparents who were born in the 1920s. Their grandparents are twice as likely to vote and three times as likely to read the newspaper, and they belong to twice as many groups. They are also twice as likely to be trusting of other people. Thus, there are great differences by generation.

You might assume that this is because old folks are more engaged and young people have not yet had a chance to get engaged, but that is not a major part of the story. Most evidence suggests that habits of civic engagement are formed when you are fifteen or twenty. People who are now in their late sixties, seventies and eighties are much more civically involved than the younger generations. For their entire lives they have been holding up the civic structure of America, and those who are holding up more than their fair share are retiring. The last of this long civic-minded

generation will be retiring next year. They are being replaced in the population by their children and grandchildren who are much less civically engaged. Unless we do something about this, the situation will get a lot worse.

Suburbanization, Architecture and Mobility

Suburbanization, the consequence of freeways, is certainly a plausible guilty-looking suspect, although I have to say that I have not yet been able to find any evidence. The average level of civic engagement or social trust is not lower in American suburbs than in the cities. In general, it is not true that suburbs are more fragmented or more isolating than central cities.

Architecture may also be an important part of the story — verandas and front porches, balconies and barbecues in the backyard. A town in California has recently been debating an ordinance — the Front Porch Ordinance — which would require, as a matter of zoning, that all new houses have front porches. The theory, I suppose, is that “if you build it, they will come.” Architecture is important, and an earlier generation of urban planners have something to answer for in the design of our communities.

I thought that residential mobility might be a very prominent suspect, but actually this is a suspect in the United States that I can completely acquit, because it is simply not true that people are more mobile than their parents or grandparents. In fact we are less mobile. The number of people who move each year, whether we are talking about moving across the street or moving across the country, is actually significantly lower now. And this trend toward declining geographical mobility has been ongoing for nearly fifty years in the United States.

The Influence of Government

Governments also may have had a role in the destruction of social capital. Some conservative commentators and politicians claim that

“big government” has caused this decline—that the reason people are not going to the PTA is because of the number of bureaucrats who go to the meetings. It is certainly true, in my view, that in the United States there have been some very important instances of government destroying social capital. Take, for example, the urban renewal programs in American central cities in the 1960s: a one-sentence summary for what they did was to renew physical capital and destroy social capital. There were brand new wonderful buildings and people lived in better homes, but they didn’t have the same neighbours that they once did, nor did they know their new neighbours. We destroyed large numbers of quite well-functioning communities.

So some government programs have actually destroyed social capital. But it is difficult for me, frankly, to believe (and that is why I talk about bowling leagues) that the reason people are no longer going to gardening clubs or bowling leagues, the reason they no longer know their neighbours, is because of big government. Let me mention just two bits of evidence that seem to me not completely consistent with the idea that this basic trend is due to big government. One is that across the American states there is virtually no correlation between levels of social capital and the size of the government. That is, the citizens in the states that have larger governments and more welfare spending are no less likely to belong to civic groups or to trust other people.

Among the OECD countries, those that have the highest levels of social trust on average and the highest levels of civic engagement (group membership, for example) tend to be the very countries with the largest welfare states — Sweden, Norway, Denmark, for example. Actually, in that global perspective the United States and Canada are at almost exactly the same point. We have, in the aggregate, almost exactly the same levels of group membership and social trust. And we are still, I would say, in the United States and in Canada too, pretty high in comparison to most other countries — that is, there is a higher level of social capital in the U.S. even after this twenty- or thirty-year decline. I am not saying that America has no civic spirit left; what I am saying

is that compared to where we were a generation ago, we have less. My best guess is that only a small part of this decline is due to government policies.

THE PRIME SUSPECT

Then what has caused this decline in social trust, in civic engagement, in “connectedness”? In general, this is a case, like the Agatha Christie novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, in which there are multiple culprits. The most reasonable conclusion from the available evidence, however, is that *a prime suspect is television*.

The timing is right. Television has hit America like a lightning bolt — the fastest infusion of any technological innovation in history. In 1949 less than ten percent of American homes had television; by 1959 more than ninety percent of American homes had television. It came like a lightning bolt and has had a continuing reverberation, so that by now the data say that the average American spends four hours a day watching television. That is not counting the hours that the set is on in the other room, but only the hours spent in front of it. There are some things you can do while you are watching television, but you cannot bowl and you cannot go to the PTA.

The main effect of the introduction of television — and this, by the way, is not unique to the United States — has been to make us more homebodies and more isolated. And whereas in the very first period all the family was sitting around the hearth watching television together, now, with the number of multi-set homes skyrocketing, we are just watching alone. And what we are watching is simulated social capital. We are watching the most popular television show in America, a show called *Friends*. Well, *Friends* is about social capital, but it is not *real* social capital. Like the program set in a Boston bar called *Cheers*, where “everybody knows your name,” a lot of what you watch on television is designed to make you think that you actually have these good buddies you see every week — but they don’t see you.

The statistical evidence is that for every hour you spend reading a newspaper you are substantially more likely to vote, more likely to trust other people, more likely to join a group. For every hour you spend in front of the television you are statistically substantially less likely to vote, less likely to join a group, and less likely to trust other people. So, although television is not the only part of the story, I think that it is a large part of the problem.

What about the Internet and “computer-mediated communication”? The net effect of the electronic revolution has been to make our communities, or what we experience as our communities, much wider geographically, and much thinner sociologically. Every day I can easily communicate with people in Germany and Japan, but I don’t know the person across the street, and the fact that I don’t know the person across the street would astonish my father more than the fact that I am talking to people across the globe every day. Place-based social capital is being replaced by function-based social capital. That is what the electronic revolution does.

For some purposes, function-based social capital is just as good, but for some purposes it is not. My friends abroad are great, and perhaps it is less likely there will be a war because I talk to them every day — but that does not do any good for the crime rate in my neighbourhood. I doubt that electronic communication has caused civic disengagement, for the computer came two or three decades into the change. On the other hand, we have to find ways in which we can use this electronic network structure to create *real* communities with *real* face-to-face interaction, not just phosphorous-to-phosphorous interaction.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Does it matter that we are less civically engaged? Well, I don’t want to spend a lot of time on this question but I do want to address it briefly because the decline in social capital matters a lot — and not just in the absence of warm cuddly feelings. Take, for example, the performance of your schools. If you are worried about the quality of schools *in your community*, you might have one of

two strategies. You could pay ten percent more on schools, better teachers, more books in the library, and so on. Or you could increase by ten percent the number of parents who are engaged with their children's education. Evidence suggests that this latter strategy may be more effective for improving the quality of schools. I am not saying that we should not be spending money on schools (my wife is a public school teacher so I have a vested interest in paying teachers well!). What I am saying is that the decline in the number of parents in America who are engaged with their children's education is almost certainly a very important reason why our schools are not functioning as well as they should.

Crime is another example. If you are worried about crime in your neighbourhood, you might have one or two strategies: you could increase by ten percent the number of cops on the beat, or you could increase by ten percent the number of neighbours who know one another's first name. The latter is quite probably the more effective crime-fighting strategy. I am not saying that we don't want cops on the beat; I am saying that the fact that we don't know our neighbours as well as our parents knew theirs is an important explanation of why Americans are so worried about crime nowadays. There are many such examples.

Social capital also matters for your physical health. There are some really interesting studies, some fascinating studies, about the health effects of social connections. Even when controlling for whether you jog or not, how old you are, what gender you are and all the risk factors, your chance of dying (well, your chance of dying is high!) — your chance of dying over the next year is cut in half by joining one group; it is cut in a quarter by joining two groups. It is not that people who are healthy join. These studies measure a person's group membership today and then record how long that person survives. So it is not reverse causality, but rather that there are apparently some physiological effects of connecting with other people.

Part of it also is that the social connections provide a kind of safety net (if you go to church every Sunday and then one day you slip in the bathtub, someone will notice, but they won't if you

don't). And another part of it is that we get feedback from other people about the state of our health. Not only the health of our communities, but also our own personal health is affected by this decline in civic engagement.

WHAT CAN **BE** DONE?

I have described the tremendous civic plague that has come across the United States over the last thirty years. I think it is the key to many of our institutional problems. However, even though what I have said so far seems deeply pessimistic, in fact I am not at all pessimistic. But in order to explain why, I would like to offer a brief image of American history.

A short-form version of what I have said so far this evening is that technological and economic and social change over the last thirty years has led to a slow but cumulatively dramatic change in the way we connect, or do not connect, with one another. Much of our social capital has vanished as a result of technological, economic and social change.

One hundred years ago, exactly, America was in a very similar situation. The industrial revolution — the thirty-year period between 1863 and 1893 — saw technological developments that transformed where and how people spent their lives. There were massive waves of immigration and, of course, urbanization. All of this had the effect of rendering obsolete a huge stock of social capital (that is just a jargony way of saying that people left their friends behind in Appleton when they moved to Chicago or elsewhere and didn't have friends or connections in their new town). Our country, in the 1890s, showed it: high rates of crime; widening economic gaps; a great sense of political corruption — a saturnalia of political corruption, as one person at the time described it; a sense that the institutions were not working and that people were disconnected from their communities. And then, in a very brief period of time, historically speaking, we created an entirely new set of institutions.

If you look at the dates at which they were created, almost all of the major civic institutions of the United States today — the Red Cross, the YWCA, the Boy Scouts, the NAACP, the Urban League, many labour unions, the Sons of Italy, the Sons of Norway, parent-teacher associations, the Rotary Club, the Sierra Club, the Knights of Columbus and many others — almost all of them were formed between 1880 and 1910, an astonishingly concentrated period. We had a social capital deficit as a country created by great technological and economic change, and at that point we could have said, “Whoa, wait a minute, stop! Everybody back to the farm. It was much nicer there. We knew everybody.” And similarly today we could say, “It was much nicer back in the '50s. Would all women please report to the kitchen and turn off the TV on the way.” But that is not what I am suggesting we should do. I am suggesting the contrary.

Our responsibility now is to create. It is not to complain about what has happened to all the Elks Clubs or bowling leagues, but to be as socially inventive as those people a Century ago who created the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts and the PTA. We must figure out what the new institutions will be that fit the new way we are living our lives, while re-creating genuine bonds of community. This is, in my view, a central challenge of our times.

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