



FRONTIER CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Profile Series

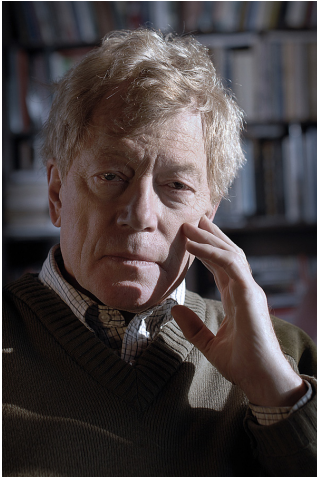
Profile of:

Sir Roger Scruton

"Conservatism starts from a sentiment that all mature people can readily share: the sentiment that good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created."

Conservatives around the world were sad to hear that a valued intellectual mentor, the philosopher Sir Roger Scruton, died of lung cancer on Sunday, January 12. He was 75 years old, and had been suffering for about six months.

Sir Roger was a university professor and public intellectual who published over 50 books and hundreds of articles and essays on art, aesthetics, morality, music, politics, and religion. He also wrote four novels and two operas.



Roger Scruton taught at the University of London from 1971 to 1992. He then resigned, but he held a string of visiting professorships at a number of universities in Britain and the U.S. As a result of his prodigious and high-quality work, he had many honours. He was knighted in 2016, and he was a fellow of the British Academy and a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

In the 1980's, Scruton smuggled books into Communist Czechoslovakia on subjects that were banned and he offered secret courses to dissident academics. In fact, he was awarded a Medal of Merit after the fall of communism. He was revered in Eastern Europe for supporting the dissidents during the time of their greatest need.

In many essays and books, Roger Scruton distinguishes between liberalism, socialism, and conservatism. The guiding

ideology of liberalism, he argued, was that people were bounded together by a social contract in which the state guaranteed them individual human rights. Otherwise, liberals thought that people should be free to pursue their own interests. Socialism, on the other hand, embraced an ideology that society is basically an economic system in which the state is responsible for distributing resources so that equality among people is achieved.

Conservatism is, in Scruton's mind, closer to liberalism than to socialism. Both ideologies value freedom, but conservatism holds that freedom must be constrained by responsibility. For this reason, he argued that markets, the bane of the socialists' ideology, are not necessarily the result of selfishness and greed. Both competition and regulations enforce responsibility into markets.

Sir Roger was often critical of conservative parties for allowing socialists to depict them as greedy and unflinchingly supporting the rich. Obviously, to keep customers loyal in a competitive market place, business people must be responsible to both their customers and their employees with written and unwritten contracts of respect and fairness. Of course, many news reports illustrate that respect and fairness are not always exhibited with bold titles like "Harvey Weinstein charged with sexually abusing young women."

Scruton recognized the problem of enforcing regulations and being watchful for abuse even for conservatives. Human nature was an issue he became interested in as he grew older. He noted, for example, that modern communications, especially social media, has seriously disrupted what had been known as common human decency, especially in personal relationships and the political process. With the rise of social media, Scruton noted that people know less, think they know more, and tell many what they think they know without really knowing what they are talking about.

In his mind, this trend has resulted in a culture war which, for conservatives, is largely about defending freedom of speech against socialists who want to restrict what people say. He noted that freedom of speech is the very bedrock of civilization. In *Conservatism: An Introduction to the Great Tradition* (2017), Roger Scruton argued that human nature is fundamental to an ordered society. Conservatives are more likely than socialists to recognize five features of an ordered society that must be considered for public policy to be successful even to a small degree. These five principles are important for think tanks, like the Frontier Center, to keep firmly in mind:

2. Individuals are, by nature, attached to others; human beings are social. First, of course, individuals are attached to their mothers, but they are also attached to fathers, families, communities, nations, and humanity. Very few people, for example, live as hermits, isolated from social interaction.

3. People are not only intimately attached to groups, but they also compete both as individuals and as group members. Within western societies, civilization is the way that this competition is regulated with both written and unwritten rules so that human competition is mostly peaceful. Nonetheless, certain sporting activities, Australian



1. People thrive in groups, which Scruton says are of three kinds, tribal, religious, and political. This is a rough demarcation to help people think about the kind of groups that exist, and he does not imply that tribal and religious groups cannot be political. In fact, anyone involved in arguments about Indigenous rights and responsibilities certainly knows that there is considerable overlap between these groups.

Rules Football, for example, seems to show that peaceful competition is far from a universal value.

4. Human beings engage both their emotions and their intellects in most interactions, both individually and in groups. Rarely is human interaction purely an intellectual endeavor. Obviously, human interactions, like love and war, draw upon both feelings and thoughts with the emotions

often over powering the thoughts.

5. Finally, human beings strive for freedom even though the groups they belong to—their families, tribes, religious groups, and nations—try to shape their striving. In personal interaction, consent is the way that the freedom of one person is constrained, and in formal organizations, contracts are the way freedom is constrained.

Roger Scruton summed up his conservative philosophy in two short sentences: “Liberals seek freedom, socialists equality without responsibility, and conservatives responsibility. And, without responsibility, neither freedom nor equality have lasting value.”

In 2016, Roger Scruton published *Confessions of a Heretic*, a short book of essays on a variety of topics include “Faking It,” “Governing Rightly,” “Dancing Properly,” and “Dying in Time.”

Now that Roger Scruton has died, it is interesting to re-read “Dying in Time.” At the beginning of this essay, he says: “Many of the most pressing ‘end of life’ issues result from medical advances that have reshaped the human condition, while appealing to moral considerations is appealing to the human condition as it was, and not as it is.

As if he had a premonition of his own death, medical advances kept him alive for a few months after his diagnosis. Thankfully, he finished a few more essays which will be published. Even though Prof. Scruton was very ill, he went to Prague in November 2019 to participate in the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. His own contribution was formally recognized, and undoubtedly he was more highly appreciated in Eastern Europe than in his home country, Britain.

Roger Scruton kept a monthly calendar on his web site, and the last paragraph was entered about a month before he died. His mind was still active as his body wasted away with cancer.

Roger Scruton dedicated his life to giving substantial intellectual substance to conservatism. Conservatives have lost a valued mentor and a fearless ally, a true fighter for freedom, responsibility, and justice. Heaven has gained an angel whose light will shine well into the future, lighting the way for young people who are trying to balance the competing and conflicting needs of their families, tribes, and nations.

Roger Scruton has gone, but his ideas remain with us.





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The Frontier Centre for Public Policy is an independent, non-profit organization that undertakes research and education in support of economic growth and social outcomes that will enhance the quality of life in our communities. Through a variety of publications and public forums, Frontier explores policy innovations required to make the prairie region a winner in the open economy. It also provides new insights into solving important issues facing our cities, towns and provinces. These include improving the performance of public expenditures in important areas such as local government, education, health and social policy. The author(s) of this study have worked independently and the opinions expressed are therefore their own, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the board of the Frontier Centre for Public Policy.

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