

of it. Besides, the social sciences – the intellectual offspring of the Enlightenment – keep pointing in hopeful spirit to levers we can pull, variables we can manipulate, as we try to promote beneficent change.

So I say again that I have no concern in principle with the Methodist impulse, and with our desire to ameliorate the lives of the least fortunate of our counterparts abroad. At rock bottom, moreover, and *pace* realists of the tougher-minded sort, I think this impulse is better defended on grounds of common decency (in defence of which there are utilitarian arguments of another kind) than by reference to national interests, narrowly conceived. The state's primary responsibility – a responsibility that lies at the core of the mechanisms of accountability that are embodied in our institutions of representative and responsible government – is to serve its own. But it is nonetheless free, within reasonable limits, to use some of its resources to serve others, too, provided that it is suitably instructed to do so by its citizenry. Our own state is routinely confronted with precisely this sort of instruction.

What concerns me instead is that our approach to fulfilling our well-intentioned international aspirations has become unthinking, and that we are increasingly guilty, as John Holmes once observed with his typical acumen, of running away from the "terrible facts." In this headlong flight, we have taken refuge in a rhetoric that Kim Nossal has devastatingly described as "ear candy." In short, I am concerned, not about our Methodism simple, but about our Methodism rampant.

More concretely put, it seems to me that we have become excessively optimistic about our capacity to transform, in ways that *we* think would be beneficial, societies in which other folk live, and in which the operating norms, traditions and circumstances are very different from our own. This optimism of purpose is accompanied – although I concede here that there have been glimmers recently of our beginning to have some second thoughts – by an optimism of means. We appear, that is, to have concluded that the transformations we have in mind can be accomplished in the relatively short term with the help of reasonably modest investments applied, not in an imperial (whether of the heavy version or the 'light'), but in a liberal spirit.

These two underlying premises are sustained by a third, which is that we are in a position to found our effort on a sound technical understanding of how to do the job. This last, of course, manifests the unconscious arrogance of the aspirant social engineer, and it feeds on an