



CHANGING OUR WORLD

www.wrf.ca/fellows




SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY AND CANADIAN PUBLIC LIFE

BY

JONATHAN CHAPLIN

Senior Fellow,
Work Research Foundation



Remarks prepared for
Jonathan Chaplin's Inauguration as a
Senior Fellow of the Work Research Foundation
on Wednesday, November 8 2006
Redeemer University College
Ancaster, Ontario



The principle of sphere sovereignty is the most familiar and most influential idea associated with the neocalvinist social movement emerging in the Netherlands in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, especially under the remarkable and combative leadership of the theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper.¹ It was forged out of a series of concrete political struggles waged by various wings of that movement for independence from what they experienced as an intolerant liberal ecclesial and political establishment. Later it was exported to North America with waves of Dutch Calvinist immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Post-war Dutch immigrants to Canada proved to be particularly tenacious defenders of the principle and invoked it as they launched a wide range of social, political, educational and industrial organizations many of which are still thriving today, even though their understanding of sphere sovereignty and the priority they place on it has inevitably undergone change over the years. The principle remains influential in American neocalvinist circles, and there is evidence of a revival of Kuyperianism in such circles and in other orthodox Protestant communities. In 1998 on the centenary of Kuyper's influential Stone Lectures at Princeton two major conferences were held in the USA, and another is being planned at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2007. A noteworthy development of recent years is also the growing interest in Kuyperian

social thought among American Catholic social thinkers, who rightly find in the principle of sphere sovereignty clear echoes of the complementary Catholic principle of subsidiarity.

But in spite of this growing curiosity about sphere sovereignty, why would anyone beyond those circles be particularly interested, at the start of the twenty-first century, in an idea of apparently arcane provenance, operative within a still relatively small constituency of Christians – many of them members of one small-ish Reformed denomination? Let me answer this question in two stages: first, I'll try to position sphere sovereignty as a distinctive and fruitful response from within the modern European Christian social movement to major societal developments crystallizing in the late nineteenth century. Having done so, I'll elaborate briefly on its concrete meaning. Second, I'll attempt to situate neocalvinist social theory in relation to some dominant recent trends in Canadian political thought and practice, illustrating along the way its concrete relevance in relation to two broad public policy issues, the health of the family and the social role of business corporations.

First, then, I want to point to the societal and ideological context in mid- to late nineteenth-century Europe in which the principle of sphere sovereignty was first articulated. That context seemed, to a growing number of Christian

social activists and thinkers, as well as others, to be characterized by two simultaneous and interconnected threats: on the one hand, the threat of an individualistic fragmentation of core social institutions, driven by a rampant and socially irresponsible industrial capitalism; and, on the other, the threat of an overweening bureaucratic state, driven by the monopolizing impulses of French revolutionary liberalism and state socialism. Like its more influential counterpart in the Catholic social movement, the neocalvinist movement responded to these challenges by vigorously re-affirming the indispensable role of communities situated between the individual and the state – families, schools, villages and neighbourhoods, labour organizations, businesses, and of course churches - and working to shore them up against these two pressures.² Other social and political movements responded similarly, and the result was a flowering of distinctly pluralistic social theories with various ideological leanings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Sphere sovereignty, then, did not drop from the sky into the neocalvinist movement of that time, nor did it leap straight out of the pages of Calvin's writings into the lap of Abraham Kuyper. It was, rather, a recognisably Calvinian response to the unique circumstances and challenges of modern European capitalism and secularism – which is why it resonated so effectively with Reformed people who were directly experiencing those challenges. Perhaps the key distinctive of the neocalvinist (and Catholic) responses to these circumstances was their appeal to a divinely created design underlying social institutions,³ a design calling for a wide distribution of social authorities across different kinds of community, each with a unique mandate to fulfil a specific social function, and which should neither dominate nor be dominated by others. "Sphere sovereignty," then, was the neocalvinist language for confessing

within that historical context a deep biblical truth: that all sovereignty originates ultimately in God and is only delegated to human beings in their diverse social spheres for particular and limited purposes. Hence Kuyper's celebrated broadsides against the doctrines of both state sovereignty and popular sovereignty.⁴ Sphere sovereignty also appeals to another profound biblical truth, that humans are not autarchic individuals who enter into cooperative relationships only for self-interested instrumental purposes, but are naturally social - inclined and fitted by creation to participate in a multiplicity of purposive communities, apart from which their flourishing is stunted.

But it is equally important to stress that sphere sovereignty, in its original formulation by Kuyper, went hand in hand with a parallel emphasis: an organic conception of society in which each distinct type of social sphere, and each individual, were construed as bound together in strong reciprocal ties of interdependency and mutual obligation. Today we would be more likely to speak instead of a complex social ecology or social networks in which communities and individuals subsist and apart from which they struggle to sustain themselves and deploy their gifts and callings.⁵

Let me add that in the translation of sphere sovereignty into a North American context dominated by liberalism, this emphasis on the complex social ecology within which properly independent spheres subsist has sometimes been neglected and needs to be reclaimed. I think this neglect is also related to a second misconception. Sphere sovereignty has in the minds of some North Americans – as also occurred for some Dutch Calvinists in the inter-war period – been reduced merely to a doctrine of the limited state, where the predominant emphasis is on the boundaries between spheres and their entitlement to legal

protection against government intrusion. And the somewhat infelicitous juridical term “sovereignty” plays into that misconception. Sphere sovereignty certainly does imply a limited state and ample legal latitude for independent social initiative. But to confine or reduce it to that is to put the cart before the horse: the deeper impulse behind sphere sovereignty is a positive affirmation of a particular pattern of social pluriformity as essential to full humanness.

So the first task of anyone wanting to put sphere sovereignty to use is to investigate what that particular pattern is. And this involves answering two questions, though they really need to be addressed simultaneously. The first question is: what irreducible, irreplaceable human social purposes do communities like families, or business corporations, or states, fulfil towards the realization of truly human society? Following Roy Clouser, I’ll call this irreducible social purpose a “structural purpose.”⁶ Whereas a particular community or institution may perform a wide variety of diverse functions, one – or perhaps more than one - will often stand out as definitive, as essential to the structure of that community. So, for example, a labour union might offer health insurance schemes for its members, or even a work-out room. These are valuable purposes, but they are ancillary. The structural purpose of a labour union – and here I’m adapting a useful definition coined by Ray Pennings⁷ - is to promote solidarity among employees as they contribute to the just stewardship of human resources within a producer community.

That’s the first question. Having identified the distinctness of particular communities, their unique structural purpose, the second question is: what forms of interconnectedness do these communities need in order to fulfil their unique social roles? For

example, in what ways are families or corporations or labour unions constitutively interdependent with other types of community or institution or networks, such as neighbourhoods, churches, voluntary associations, schools, governments, product or capital markets, trade corridors,⁸ and many more? And what reciprocal obligations does this interdependence give rise to?

For example, we’re all aware of an increasing tendency for families, and households generally, to retreat in on themselves and disengage from neighbourhood, voluntary or public service. This can occur because of externally imposed pressures to earn a minimum income, or a self-imposed preoccupation with paid work for the purposes of maximising consumption, or internal family collapse. But whatever the cause, this retreat is a serious breakdown in a vital part of our complex social ecology, and it requires a variety of remedies to address it.⁹

Or, consider the implications of the term “socially responsible enterprise.” This is a useful term so long as it does not piously imply that running a business is not *itself* fulfilling an essential social responsibility. Let me propose that the structural purpose of a business corporation is: “the efficient production and delivery of socially needed goods and services by a producer community” (or, as John Paul II puts it, a “society of persons”¹⁰). A business corporation which meets this definition, which is structured as a producer community - and not just as a “nexus of contracts,” to cite a standard definition from corporate law texts – and which supplies quality goods and services meeting some humanly important need, is *already* fulfilling a vital social function merely by being itself. But we can also widen the scope of the term “socially responsible enterprise” beyond these internal tasks, towards a full recognition of the embeddedness of all economic activity

within a social ecology – and, we should add, a natural ecology.¹¹ Take just one familiar example - the huge recent expansion of massive out-of-town retail outlets such as Wal-Mart, among others. This has too often occurred at the direct expense of main street or neighbourhood stores which are sometimes the only accessible stores for those without cars or who cannot drive - the elderly and disabled, for example. While massive retailers like Wal-Mart have no doubt put plenty of cheap consumer products in the hands of individual households (it has in mine, I admit), they have also at times inflicted deep and perhaps permanent damage to the social ecologies of many neighbourhoods and small towns.

So the insistence on the distinctness of social spheres must go hand in hand with a recognition of their mutual interdependency. To blend Calvinist and Catholic language, sphere sovereignty and solidarity are inseparable.

Now so far I have only hinted at what the role of the state might be in relation to sphere sovereignty and solidarity. I've opted to spell out the wider societal meaning of sphere sovereignty at some length before zeroing in on its specifically political, governmental application. Let me offer two brief propositions on this. First, the state will find itself responsible *both* for protecting and supporting the sovereignty of other spheres, *and* for acting to safeguard the wider social ecology in which sovereign spheres function. This is because, on the neocalvinist view, the state's unique sphere sovereignty, its irreducible structural purpose, is to administer just interrelationships among persons and spheres, *insofar as these fall within the public realm* – to promote “public justice,” a term which plays a similar role in neo-Calvinist thought to that played by the term “common good” in Catholic thought.¹² And this will involve activities of various kinds: first, policing the boundaries between spheres to prevent one from inadvertently undermining or intentionally dominating another;

second, supporting social spheres, such as marriage and family, whose failure to fulfil a unique function could seriously damage the fabric of public life (that's one way to formulate the Catholic principle of subsidiarity); third, stimulating, or if necessary directly providing, the complex infrastructure needed to sustain and enhance cooperative and just public interactions – anything from transit systems to a stable currency to immunization programs to market regulation.¹³

This reading of the sphere sovereignty of the state equally resists both the minimal state conception of libertarianism and the expansive state conception of social democracy and progressivist liberalism (on which more in a moment). It points to an active state which is fully prepared and empowered to fulfil its irreplaceable role as guardian of the public good, and yet a restrained state ready to defer to other irreducible social authorities in their own sovereign spheres of functioning.¹⁴ But here is a vital observation: the *general principle* of sphere sovereignty itself does not inform us what the unique functions or exact boundaries of the different spheres are; nor does it disclose the complex interdependencies in which they stand; and nor does it advise us straightforwardly what the scope of their public interactions may be which merit some state activity. The answers to those questions depend on a background social ontology assumed by the general principle, an ontology which characterises what communities like families and corporations actually are, what are their “natures.”

Of course on these questions there is deep disagreement today, both beyond but also within the Christian community, especially on the nature of marriage and the family and the social role of the corporation. Appeals to sphere sovereignty do not resolve such disputes, but I do think the principle provides a clarifying framework for determining what is at issue in them. For example, it insists that in the debate over the legal

status of same-sex partnerships, the question cannot be reduced to whether or not yet another extension of homogeneous individual rights by the state is merited in this case. Rather, participants in the debate must confront the question whether marriage, and family, have an enduring structural character that must be reckoned with before courts or legislators rush to judgement on the so-called “rights” question (which is what recently happened in Canada). And on the question of the public-legal regulation of businesses, a sphere sovereignty approach urges that the issue not be defined as and so reduced to merely the issue of what will maximize productivity or profitability under the admittedly very chill winds of global competition.¹⁵ External, financially-defined success in the currently skewed structure of some existing capital and product markets¹⁶ cannot be allowed to trump core internal corporate norms, such as fair treatment of diverse stakeholders within and beyond the producer community, ecological stewardship, or just contractual conditions.

Let me finally briefly attempt to position the wider social vision in which sphere sovereignty is located more specifically in relation to the current Canadian political landscape. Earlier I said that sphere sovereignty, along with other pluralist theories, emerged as a response to the two-pronged threats of individualism and statism in the nineteenth century Europe. I think we can see recurrences of these same threats today, and so it’s not surprising that there should be a revival of pluralism in our time. This presents a strategic opportunity to put the principle of sphere sovereignty critically to work again in our own public policy debates. Let me sum up the social ontology underlying sphere sovereignty as a “differentiated communitarianism.” It is communitarian in its insistence that individual persons are constituted and sustained only within communal contexts, and in its repudiation of

individualistic variants of liberalism which see inter-personal linkages as essentially contractual in nature, or which see the goal of the fulfilment of individually chosen ends as trumping obligations arising from communal memberships. Yet it resists versions of communitarianism which posit some single, all-embracing community – typically the state or the nation – as having moral and perhaps political primacy over other social bonds. It insists instead on the moral equivalence of a plurality of differentiated communities, each with an irreducible purpose not to be conflated with or subordinated to those of other communities.

Now, with the demise of the older organic conservatism associated with the Red Tory tradition, and the original social democratic tradition of the NDP, the ideological field seems now to be largely dominated by two species of liberalism.¹⁷ On the one hand there is the progressivist egalitarian liberalism¹⁸ currently shaping the direction of the Liberal party, with its recent past in Trudeau and its possible future in Ignatieff, and of which the current NDP is now perhaps only a more radical echo. This strand of liberalism professes a strong commitment both to individual freedom and to social justice. Now I think that some policies flowing from such a vision can certainly be consistent with implications flowing from sphere sovereignty. First, sphere sovereignty also recognizes the “sovereignty of the personal sphere,” to adapt one of Kuyper’s own terms. Neocalvinism was always strongly in favour of individual freedoms such as freedom of religion and conscience, of speech, movement, and of civil rights such as the right to a fair trial.¹⁹ It was also motivated from its inception by a deep outrage at social injustice, whether in education or the economy. But for today’s progressivist liberalism, social justice is to be realized primarily by empowering individuals, through a variety of public policies, to participate more fully in areas

of social, economic and cultural life from which they are seen as being excluded. This is not an adequate overall policy strategy. But insofar as this strand of liberalism recognises that you can't empower individuals without *also* protecting and supporting the communities on which they depend - their families, schools, voluntary associations, neighbourhoods, ethnic community organizations - then there will likely be a practical convergence with a sphere sovereignty approach in certain areas of public policy. For instance, I would expect adherents to sphere sovereignty to be equally motivated as progressive liberals to address the continuing scandal of child poverty in Canada. On the other hand, they are likely to favour a more complex package of proposals which reckon with the multifaceted causes of poverty - poverty is not just lack of adequate financial resources - and which support the differentiated responsibilities of diverse social institutions in addressing poverty, of which the state is only one.²⁰

But today's progressivist liberalism, here and in the USA and increasingly in Europe as well, seems to want to do much more than merely play a supportive role to independent communities. It increasingly seems intent on refashioning some of the institutions of civil society - especially those deemed to be "traditional" - in the image of a uniform national community of freestanding individuals equipped with maximum scope for personal choice, whether in consumption or in sexuality. The irony here is obvious: a movement dedicated to promoting an ever-expanding realm of individuality, and at the same time promoting respect for cultural plurality, now seems headed towards a liberal nationalist variant of communitarianism in which the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is taken to embody the binding essential values of a homogeneous Canadian nation.

The second main variant of liberalism is a conservative version of neo-liberalism, championed from Mulroney through the Calgary school²¹ to at least the younger Stephen Harper. This strand of liberalism places primacy on removing as many barriers to individual economic exchange as possible, on the twin assumptions that maximising individual freedom is the principal goal of the state, and that the most important kind of freedom for human society is economic. A sphere sovereignty response to this position again needs to be vigorous but nuanced. Where a bloated public sector or misplaced government regulation of businesses, especially smaller and medium-sized ones, or markets - the Wheat Board has come in for attack here - where these interventions materially obstruct business in fulfilling its unique function *as defined earlier*, then there is undoubtedly a *prima facie* case for reasserting the sphere sovereignty of business. And the protection of wide possibilities for open market exchanges among independent persons and corporations is a vital condition for a system which quite properly trusts non-government actors to be the principal source of economic initiative and coordination. But where governments one-sidedly pursue a goal of maximising individual economic exchange as the definitive purpose of economic life and the only route to economic success, then they are bound to neglect their duties as guardians of the public dimensions of the complex social ecology I spoke of earlier. They will fail to do public justice in the economy. And if they do fail, then economic failure will also be the long-term result and the cost will likely fall disproportionately on those with fewest economic resources, at home and abroad.

So I suggest, then, that a social and political vision informed by the principle of sphere sovereignty and balanced by that of solidarity is actually very well-equipped to discern the strengths

and weaknesses of these and other contemporary political trends. And those informed by such a social vision should find themselves well-positioned not only to cooperate strategically with those of other political persuasions on selected public policies, but also to propose innovative ways forward where existing public policy directions seem to have run out of steam or met with failure.

Notes

¹ For the best overview of Kuyper's thought, see Peter Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For an interpretation of Kuyper's relevance for North American culture, see John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). See also Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

² Some of the background to these developments is described in Kirstin Vander Giessen-Reitsma, "Christianity and Labour: Obstacles and Contributions in the Early Stages," *Comment* (Spring 2003), 11-15.

³ For a contemporary statement of this view, see Gideon Strauss, "The DNA of Economic Life," *Comment* (July-August 2001), 20-22.

⁴ For one of Kuyper's classic statements on sphere sovereignty (in English), see Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), ch. III. For the other, see his "Sphere

Sovereignty," in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 461-490. A useful overview of Kuyper's social and political thought is Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview*, ch. 6. For a comparison and exposition of both neocalvinist and Catholic social and political thought, see David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2003), chs. 8, 9. See also Ray Pennings, "Sphere Sovereignty 101," *Comment* Vol. 22 1.2 (March 2004).

⁵ The term "social ecology" I derive from Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991) ch. 5. The economic implications of this theme are addressed from various angles in the following: Michael Van Pelt, "Pioneering Worldview Economics," *Comment* (May-June 2001), 16-18; Gideon Strauss, "The Social Architecture of Business," *Comment* (Spring 2002), 10-13; Gideon Strauss, "The Social Architecture of the Ontario Economy," *Comment* (Summer 2002), 21-23; James Brink, "Squares or Triangles: Cutting Up

the Market,” *Comment* 24.1 5 (September 2005); Jonathan Wellum, “‘Short-Termism’ and some significant challenges to the capital markets,” WRF Senior Fellow Inaugural Address, 14 September 2006, Toronto.

⁶ Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 291.

⁷ Ray Pennings, “Kuyper’s Sphere Sovereignty and Modern Economic Institutions,” *Comment* (Winter 2003), 17. This definition helps me see that trade unions are not to be seen only, and maybe not even primarily, as performing a corrective function over against disproportionate managerial power in the corporation, but also as performing a constructive function in the internal corporate stewarding of human resources.

⁸ Russ Kuykendall, “Six Trade Corridors to the US: the Lifeblood of Canada’s Economy,” *Policy Options* (July-August 2006), 47-52; Michael Van Pelt and Russ Kuykendall, *Greenlighting Trade: A Trade Corridor Atlas* (Hamilton N: Work Research Foundation).

⁹ I won’t attempt a formal definition of the structural purpose of a family here. It would likely focus on the core tasks of the moral and emotional nurture of children, with the potentiality for procreation acknowledged as an integral part of the definition (without in any way excluding adoptive families from the definition).

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1991), para. 43. Bob Goudzwaard defines the business enterprise in parallel terms as a “a work community of living people,” in *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society* (Toronto:Wedge/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 216. Jonathan Wellum moves in a similar direction in “Short-termism,” 8.

¹¹ For important critical insights on ecological stewardship in relation to contemporary global economics, see Bob Goudzwaard & Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence:*

Towards a Canadian Economy of Care (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). As a whole the neocalvinist tradition has been slow in waking up to the challenge of this theme, and modifying the institutionalist bias of its social thought according.

¹² For a short statement of the meaning of this term, see my “Defining Public Justice in a Pluralistic Society: Probing a Key Neo-Calvinist Insight,” *Pro Rege* (March 2004), 1-10.

¹³ Unfortunately here I’ll have to pass over the state’s role to promote just global interactions, but the thrust of what I’ve said could be readily extrapolated in that area. For an application to American foreign policy see, e.g. James W. Skillen, *With or Against the World: America’s Role Among the Nations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

¹⁴ For a highly illuminating concrete application of the principle of sovereignty, by Kuyper himself, to the question of labour organization under late nineteenth-century capitalism, see Abraham Kuyper, “Manual Labour,” in Bratt., ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 231-254. An attentiveness to sphere sovereignty also informs Bob Goudzwaard’s critical analysis of government-industry relations as they emerged under nineteenth-century capitalism and evolved further into its twentieth-century variant. *Capitalism and Progress*, ch. 9.

¹⁵ See Bob Goudzwaard, *Globalization and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker/ Washington, D.C.: Center for Public Justice, 2001), and responses. See also the exchanges entitled “Debating Globalization” in *Comment* and (Winter 2003), 32-39.

¹⁶ For a critical assessment of how capital markets are today being skewed by excessively short-term horizons, see Jonathan Wellum, “Short-termism.”

¹⁷ For an insightful critical analysis of various strands of liberal political thought, see Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions*, ch. 2. For a Christian defense of a variant of classical liberalism, see

Doug Bandow, "Living With Liberalism: living Christian faith in a liberal age," *Comment* Vol. 34.1 4 (2006). See also further contributions to the "Living with Liberalism" series in subsequent issue of *Comment*.

¹⁸ This is akin to what Koyzis identifies as the fifth and most recent phase of liberalism, characterized by a commitment to the "choice enhancement state." See note 15.

¹⁹ See Abraham Kuyper, "Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of our Constitutional Liberties," in Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 279-322.

²⁰ A paper on poverty published by the Social Action Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) in 1999 stated this differentiated approach exceptionally well. EFC, "Good News to

the Poor! Background Paper on The Bible, Poverty, and Government in Contemporary Canada." An abridged version appears in a book produced by the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative (CEJI), *Jubilee, Wealth & the Market* (CEJI, 1999), 141-159. See also Gideon Strauss's review of an important book by Hernando de Soto (*The Mystery of Capital*), "The Poor Are Not the Problem," *Comment* (September-October 2001), 19-22. For an early, classic neocalvinist response to poverty, see Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

²¹ For insightful reflections on this school, see David Koyzis, "The Calgary School and the Future of Canada," *Comment* 24.1 6 (September 2005); Russ Kuykendall, "Has neoconservatism passed its Best-Before date?," *Comment* Vol. 32.1 9 (2006).

