

## **Governments give – or take away – our rights**

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It is commonly believed that some rights and freedoms are so basic that they are inalienable. That is, they cannot be given nor taken away by laws or governments. These rights are claimed to be so much a part of being human that justice demands they prevail for every human in every society.

It is easier to imagine such rights and freedoms than to list them because different societies claim somewhat different inalienable rights. Many societies claim that everyone has the right to free citizenship as opposed to being held in slavery. Others claim the right of each citizen to vote in democratic societies if they are of a mature age which is usually set by the government in charge. In some countries such as Canada, only males in the earlier part of our past century were allowed to have the right to vote in democratic elections.

In the United States the second amendment defends the right of its citizens to bear arms (to purchase and own guns). In the USA first amendment, the right to freedom of speech also comes close to being inalienable, provided some protection is offered to other citizens who may be adversely affected by individual free speech. For example, telling lies should not be part of free speech.

The main point about inalienable rights is that they vary according to one's time in history or one's geographic location or even to one's ethnic background or sexual orientation. Inalienable rights are perhaps a useful tool in imagining what rights humans ought to have in a just and fair society. But in practical terms one's rights, including religious rights, are determined by the governments where they currently reside. So in practical terms, we should perhaps set aside the notion of inalienable rights and think instead of what rights, privileges and freedoms within our own country can presently best serve our human needs. We cannot expect that inalienable rights will magically and ethereally flow down from above nor

will humans be born into this world with each person having inalienable rights at the time of one's birth.

For those of us who reside in Canada, we ought to be grateful for the privileges, rights, and the opportunities and freedoms we now have. We also ought to realize that the rights given to us by our governments can also be taken away. The rights we now have are rights that did not come about quickly nor easily. For example, for Canadian women to be allowed to vote in democratically held elections, many citizens fought for this right including hardworking, determined women who sacrificed much effort before governments were persuaded to grant women the right to vote.

In Canada over the years we have established public health care systems which offer many citizens the right to good health care. Had it not been for the efforts of our forebears such as Tommy Douglas in the 1960s and his supporting government, we may not yet have been granted the type of public health care we now enjoy. For example, in the USA, governments and citizens are currently struggling to bring about government supported public health care.

One would expect that indigenous peoples, more than other Canadian citizens, would be among the first people to enjoy the most complete array of human rights. However, in Canadian history our earlier governments, through our school systems as well as some earlier religious systems, were among the greatest usurpers of human rights for First Nations people.

In the matter of job opportunities and equal pay for equal work for males and females, early governments were often defenders of unequal working conditions. In total, it was usually females who were denied the rights provided to their male counterparts. Also, clean water, clean air and healthy natural environments in an ideal world ought to be part of one's inalienable rights. Yet governments frequently work very slowly towards provision of such rights. When they do, it is often in response to popular demand rather than concern for individual rights and freedoms. In summary, our rights, freedoms, and privileges are given and may also be taken away by the governments where we reside. Human rights are developed through rational thinking and caring concerns about improving human values.