

## THE SENIOR COLLEGE MESSENGER

Issue 53: March, 2025

*This is an organ for members of Senior College to submit short articles that share news, letters to the editor, reactions to the program and anything that they feel will be of general interest. Its regular appearance will allow for an exchange of opinion on topics of interest to the members. In particular, it would be interesting to record reactions to the talks, colloquium topics, books discussed and items appearing in the Messenger.*

*We also welcome brief notices of important books of general interest that are worth reading and views on what should be included in a modern school curriculum from the perspective of your discipline. In particular, if you have written a book or an article in your field that would be of broad interest, please send in the details. In December, we celebrated the final volume of the Nemni trilogy on Trudeau and this month we draw your attention to a new book by Helen Lenskyj.*

*Please submit contributions to the co-editors, Ed Barbeau at [barbeau@math.utoronto.ca](mailto:barbeau@math.utoronto.ca) or Mary Finlay at [booksaplenty1949@gmail.com](mailto:booksaplenty1949@gmail.com).*

Any reader wishing a copy of this issue in larger print should contact the first co-editor.

## CANADA AT THE CROSSROADS

21st Annual Senior College Symposium

Wednesday, April 15, 9am-4pm; Faculty Club

You can now register for the annual symposium:

- In-person (\$85 until noon, April 6; \$100 until noon, April 13)  
<https://uoft.me/21st-annual-attendance-symposium-85>
- Zoom (\$25; upgrade opportunity)  
<https://uoft.me/zoom-2025-symp-25>

Speakers: **Bob Rae, Dimitry Anastakis, Dan Breznitz, Danyaal Raza, Tony Keller, David Milne**

For further details and program updates, visit  
<https://uoft.me/annual-SC-symposium>

## MEDICAL ASSISTANCE IN DYING

On Wednesday, February 18, members of Senior College gathered in person and on line for a presentation on MAiD by **Kevin Reel**, the Senior Ethicist, Health Ethics Alliance of Sunnybrook Health Services Centre. This was a comprehensive analysis that included the evolution of public attitudes and the law in Canada, valid and specious arguments for and against the process, the balancing of personal autonomy against the risks of coercion and lack acceptable alternatives.

The situation in Canada has evolved since the Supreme Court rejected the petition of Sue Rodriguez in 1993 to access assisted suicide. Starting about twenty years ago, favourable rulings by the Supreme Court of Canada and the Superior Court of Quebec invoking the Charter forced the federal government to legalize MAiD and extend its scope.

Currently under review are advance requests (to counter the risk of a person becoming not mentally competent to make a decision) and the allowance of MAiD when a mental disorder is the sole underlying medical condition. This link from Health Canada explains the process and safeguards currently in effect:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-services-benefits/medical-assistance-dying.html>

## WELCOME TO SENIOR COLLEGE

*We welcome Jean O’Grady from Victoria College as a Fellow of the College.*

I am a graduate of Victoria College, where I took the Honour Course in English Language and Literature, sadly abolished shortly thereafter. Then I went to Yale graduate school, but abandoned my career there to marry a Toronto English professor, Walter O’Grady, have three daughters, and follow various academic by-ways, including lecturing and a delightful stint alongside Margaret Procter marking English Proficiency Tests. Eventually I picked up my original plans and transferred my Yale credits to the U of T, where I finished my PhD in English at last in 1978. I am never happier than when doing academic writing or figuring out how best to explain something.

I found my ideal job as a postdoctoral fellow on *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* at Victoria. What fun, in those pre-Google days, to scurry through Robarts from reference room to stacks, learning the difference between the various guides to the peerage, or reading *The Times* on microfilm and the British parliamentary papers on microfiche. At the end of the project I spent two years compiling a cumulative index to the previous 32 volumes – a work which, strangely, is still my best source of royalties.

After a three-year hiatus, during which I worked on my three independent books on Canadian subjects, especially a biography of Margaret Addison, I found another happy berth on Vic’s new project, *The Collected Works of Northrop Frye*. As Associate Editor, I ran the daily business of the project for its entire duration of about 20 years, and edited or co-edited six of the volumes.

Now in retirement I have gone back to my first love, the Victorians. I have been looking at the peers and the way prime ministers and members of cabinet functioned from the House of Lords. There are some essays on my website (<https://www.jeanogrady.ca/intro.html>) in case anyone is interested. I also ride my bike around, do English country dancing, encourage my garden to grow, and try to be a helpful and non-judgmental grandmother. I am delighted to become a member of Senior College, and look forward to adding attending its meetings to my activities.

## IN MEMORIAM

Anne M.R. Agur (November 10, 1953 – January 26, 2026)  
Professor of Anatomy

## CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS

Events marked with **F** are for fellows and external fellows. Advanced registration is necessary for each event. This can be done in response to a weekly email from Senior College to its members that describes the events or through the Senior College website.

### Annual Senior College Symposium

*Faculty Club: Wednesday, April 15, 2026, 9am-4pm*

**Talks: Wednesdays 2-3 pm** (In person at the Faculty Club and on Zoom)

March 4: Ira Wells, *On book banning: saving children from the harm of books*

March 11: Carl Knappett, *The coastal world of Minoan Palaikastro*

March 18: Jennifer Brunnell, *Place and people at the margins: a history of Toronto's Don River valley*

March 25: Nick Terpstra, *Moving targets: young people in the early modern world*

**Colloquia: Thursdays 2-4 pm** (In person only) (**F**)

March 19: *How to deal with the problems of aging* (Organizer: Marty Klein)

**Book Club: Mondays 2-4 pm** (Zoom only) (**F**)

March 2: George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) (Leader: Lisa Steele)

April 6: Charles King, *Every valley: the desperate lives and troubled times that made Handel's "Messiah"* (2024) (Leaders: Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon)

May 4: Rachel Carson, *Silent spring* (1962) (Leader: Sara Shettleworth)

June 1: Ian Johnson, *Sparks: China's underground historians and the battle for the future* (2023) (Leader: Peter Alberti)

July 6: Susan Casey, *The underworld: journeys to the depths of the ocean* (2023) (Leader: William Logan)

### Quotation

When used judiciously, swearing can be hilarious, poignant, and uncannily descriptive. More than any other form of language, it recruits our expressive faculties to the fullest: the combinatorial power of syntax; the evocativeness of metaphor; the pleasure of alliteration, meter, and rhyme; and the emotional charge of our attitudes, both thinkable and unthinkable. It engages the full expanse of the brain: left and right, high and low, ancient and modern. Shakespeare, no stranger to earthy imprecations himself, had Caliban speak for the entire human race when he said, "You taught me language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse."<sup>1</sup>

Steven Pinker, *The stuff of thought: language as a window into human nature*. Viking, 2007. (Chapter 7: *The seven words you can't say on television*, p. 372)

---

<sup>1</sup>*The Tempest*, Act 1:2

### Aftermath

Many people thinking of mathematical application might not include politics in their list. However, the world of practical politics raises issues for which a mathematical analysis is needed to provide clarification of advantages and pitfalls of a course of action.

One such situation arises with a provision of the US Constitution that provides, essentially, that the number of seats assigned to a state in the House of Representatives be proportional to the population of the state. A difficulty arises when the calculation does not assign a whole number of seats: what should you do when it yields, say, 4.57? Do you assign 4 seats, 5 seats, or some other number? Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton both had a go at a method, and in 1852 Hamilton's was adopted. Begin by assigning the largest integer not exceeding the calculated amount, and then assign the leftover seats according to the size of the fractional parts. In 1880, it was proposed that the size of the House be increased from 299 (with the same population figures). It was discovered that going to 300 seats would decrease the number of representatives for Alabama from 8 to 7. In the course of time, other paradoxes arose. Sometimes when a population of one state increases faster than another, it may actually lose a seat in a reassignment. Another possibility is the admission of new states along with additional seats to accommodate them; an existing state may wind up with fewer seats. Those interested in numerical examples and historical references can check out the Wikipedia entry for *Apportionment Paradox*. Also available on the net is Chapter 9.3 (Apportionment paradoxes) of *Mathematics Libre Texts*.

A similar set of issues arises for the various types of ballots used in voting for candidates seeking public office. The founding president of Senior College, Peter Russell, was particularly interested in the question of providing a substitute for the present "first-past-the-post" method in Canada and cofounded an organization *RaBIT* to lobby for this; the website is <https://www.rabit.ca>. One option is to provide a ranked ballot in which each voter selects a number of candidates and orders them according to preference. The count proceeds in several rounds. At each round, the candidate with the fewest first-place votes is dropped, and the second choice on the affected ballots becomes a first choice in the next round. This continues until some candidate has at least half the votes and is declared the winner.

This is also beset with problems. For example, a compromise candidate with a small number of first place votes and a large number of second place votes and a likely prospect may be dropped by a small margin who might have moved up in the preference later and perhaps won. An October 6, 2008 article in *Scientific American* (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/ranking-candidates-more-accurate>) discusses the Bush-Gore election and a French presidential election.

The branch of mathematics, social choice theory, that deals with this dates back to the eighteenth century work of the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), a French philosopher and political economist, who pointed out one of the original paradoxes. Further information can be had in the Wikipedia entries of *Condorcet paradox* and *Arrow impossibility theorem*.

Mathematics cannot dictate a course of action; it is necessary for people to apply ethical, practical, cultural and political judgment.