**INSPIRE! Five Faculty Members, Their Research and One Piece of Advice for First Year Students**

**Professor Michael Pal**

Prof. Liew: We are speaking with Professor Michael Pal who is an expert in public law and democracy law, election law. Can you tell us a little bit about your current research and how you got interested in it.

Prof. Pal: For sure! Thanks for having me. So I study the law of democracy which is basically all the rules and institutions and legal processes around how we have elections and how politics works. It’s proven to be a very controversial topic recently. So a lot of what I am doing these days is talking about democratic decline and is it really happening, and if so how can we manage it. So there are countries around the world like Hungary and Poland and South Africa, maybe Japan and a bunch of others where there are still elections and they are still democracies but all the broader norms and values about protection for the right to vote, free political expression, and equal participation for all individuals are potentially under threat.

And Canada is not immune either to those kind of challenges and we had a bit of controversy around the Fair Elections Act. Discussions are happening right now around the City of Toronto. Parliament is considering right now election legislation. There is a case right now in front of the Supreme Court about whether Canadians who live outside of the country for more than five years should lose their right to vote or not. So there is a whole host of issues about how democracy actually works, how governments become legitimate and so those are the questions that fascinate me. I guess that is part of constitutional law, part of public law. A lot of it is comparative. I spend my time thinking about how to make democracy better and are there ways in which we can protect it from those who are not as committed to it as I think they should be.

Prof. Liew: So how did you get interested in this topic and this area of the law?

Prof. Pal: So I had a background in political science like maybe a lot of law students, maybe some of you in first year. So I had always been interested in politics, spent a little bit of time working in and around politics when I was younger and I actually was a parliamentary intern which was the non-partisan program with the Canadian Political Science Association. And you work with a couple of different MPs on the Hill in a non-partisan role, as kind of a legislative assistant. One of the MPs I had was a guy by the name of Jacques Saada who was from the greater Montreal area riding and he was on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which to all the interns sounded really boring, but it ended up being the committee that dealt with redrawing of federal electoral boundaries. And so in helping him through that, I ended up learning a lot about that process and writing a little bit about it. That kind of sparked an interest in these broader issues around election law, voting rights, campaign finance law and the legal side of democracy. I ended up going to law school in Canada and then going to study with some people at NYU who kind of founded election law as a field, I think it’s fair to say. It just went from there. It just happened to be from working in politics and then landing in a committee that maybe sounded boring and it turned out to be really fascinating.

Prof. Liew: That’s super interesting. So can you tell us a little bit about what’s been challenging about researching in this area of the law? What’s been disappointing about the developments you’ve been talking about?

Prof. Pal: There’s been a few different things. I think sometimes in Canada, we have this, not superiority, it’s the wrong word, but we can be complacent about some of the things that make this, that make the country what it is. Some of the institutions, how our democracy functions and elections. So, occasionally in trying to say there is ways we could do better and ways in which we could improve, you sometimes are met with resistance of well things are better here than in some other place and you don’t want to be accused of being cynical and skeptical all the time but I think democracy is fragile. And some of the things happening in the U.S. and elsewhere have show that it is fragile and is something we have to nourish. But occasionally, there are challenges in trying to persuade people because it is easy to find an example around the world. It’s also a very political area, so as an academic I want to stick to principles but when you say this is how you should regulate political speech on Facebook, that is seen as having political consequences for one party or another party, or one leader or another leader. If you say, this is how we should draw electoral boundaries, that has really direct electoral consequences so trying to stay above the partisan fray is one of the challenges for sure.

Prof. Liew: And what’s been the most exciting aspect of this research that you’ve been working on or something new that you’d like to maybe let people know about?

Prof. Pal: I mean I find it exciting in a bunch of different ways, you know, to get up everyday and work on it. I think being able to have real world, translating academic ideas into a real world impact has been very gratifying. So I was recently on, the provincial government appointed me on the Far North Electoral Boundaries Commission for the province of Ontario where we did consultations in the north including with Indigenous communities. We were the first commission that had Indigenous majority we probably did the most extensive consultations in the north of Ontario that had ever happened around electoral boundaries. And as a result, more Indigenous MPPs were elected than ever before in Ontario in those ridings. I’ve also worked with governments on changing their campaign finance laws, testified before Parliamentary committees on amendments, seen my academic research quoted in the House of Commons as the basis for change in the law so that’s all been very gratifying when you can see actual concrete difference that have been made that I would like to think have helped Canadian democracy.

Prof. Liew: What one piece of advice do you have for first year students who are starting their careers in law, reflecting on where you have come from and the work you have done thus far? What one piece of advice can you give?

Prof. Pal: That’s a tough one because everyone is different and has different goals but I would say I wouldn’t have necessarily imagined that I would be doing what I’m doing now when I started. And if I think to the other people that I started law school with, very few of them are doing the kind of practice or the kind of work or the kind of job that they saw themselves as going into the law but I mean that in a good way. They discovered new things and found new avenues that they found exciting and which get them up every morning. So be open to different possibilities. Try to meet as many people as you can in different kinds of work because it may surprise you all the variety of possibilities there are in the legal profession. So that definitely was advice that someone gave me that served me well, so I would like to pass it on to first year students. And be patient with yourselves. You can’t, it sometimes takes a few weeks or a few months, or longer to “get” the law. I clerked for Justice Moldaver who always tells the story how he got a C+ in criminal law in first year and is now on the Supreme Court of Canada, and agree with him or disagree with him, is now known as an expert in criminal law. So be patient and kind to yourselves in first year.

Prof. Liew: I certainly did not envision myself to be here doing immigration law as well when I was in law school so that is actually very, very true. Thank you for your time Professor Pal and welcome to first year everyone.