



# Ideology and Citizenship

## PART

# 4

*Never underestimate the power of a few committed people to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

—Anthropologist Margaret Mead  
(1901–1978)

In this part of your course, you will have the opportunity to consider ways of applying the understandings you have gained from previous chapters. Having explored ideologies in general and liberalism in particular—its principles, its evolution, its critics, its successes and failures, and its contributions to and implications for democratic citizenship—you are now in a position to think about the relationship between ideology and active citizenship.

Consider the story of American Greg Mortenson. In 1993, he tried to climb the Himalayan peak “K2” and failed. Weak and barely able to descend the mountainside, Mortenson was nursed back to health by people living in a Muslim village nearby in Pakistan. As a result, he made a personal commitment to act and to make a difference: he promised the men and women who rescued him that he would build them a school.

Back at home, Mortenson’s fund-raising campaign got off to a dismal start. According to an article in the *New York Times*, “his 580 fundraising letters to prominent people generated one check, from Tom Brokaw—and Mr. Mortenson ended up selling his beloved climbing equipment and car.”

But Mortenson built the school as promised, and then continued to build more schools in the isolated regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. For each project, villagers supplied the land and employed locals so that the school would involve a sense of local effort and ownership. Mortenson provided the funding. So far, the Taliban seems uninterested in attacking these schools built by local labour.

Mortenson points out, “Schools are a much more effective bang for the buck than missiles...” He believes that educated women will be less likely to support their sons being recruited by the Taliban and that educated young men will be less attracted by Taliban ideology (Source: Nicholas Kristof, “It Takes a School, Not Missiles”, *New York Times*, July 13, 2008).

To what extent are the choices and actions of Greg Mortenson an expression of his having embraced an ideology? In what ways do his actions demonstrate responsible citizenship?



Part 4 of this course investigates the issue *To what extent should my actions as a citizen be shaped by an ideology?* In order to begin to answer this question you'll need to develop an understanding of the term "citizenship." Most likely you already have a sense of what is meant by this term.

- A citizen lives in and is a member of a country.
- A citizen votes.
- A citizen has certain responsibilities like usually obeying laws and paying taxes.
- A citizen also has certain rights like protection from arbitrary arrest and freedom of speech.

But surely citizenship is much more than legal status. In the next chapter you will read that Andrew Coyne, a well known Canadian columnist, believes that being a citizen of a country means being part of a *moral project*. What does this involve and on what ideology is this moral project based? Can you be part of many moral projects—in your community or country, or globally?

Mark Kingwell, a University of Toronto professor of philosophy, based his book *The World We Want* on similar ideas. Kingwell states that the purpose of his book "is to provoke reflection on the idea of citizenship at a time when such reflection is in painfully short supply, whether from pressures of time or from assumptions of certainty—whether from *busyness* or from *knowingness*, the twin distracting deities of our day." (Mark Kingwell, *The World We Want* [Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield], p. 4.) What is the world you want? What roles and responsibilities might you have in taking action to achieve this world? How does your personal ideology make sense of Andrew Coyne's "moral project"? Does your personal ideology allow you to reflect on the idea of citizenship? Like Greg Mortenson, does your personal ideology lead you to consider a citizenship that is driven by responsible and informed action geared toward making the world a better place?

There are many examples of young people who decide to take responsible action to practise their citizenship and to make a difference. In 2001, Christine Jairamasingh, 16, and Eryn Fitzgerald, 15, sued the Alberta government to change the Municipal Election Act to lower the voting age from 18 to 16, allowing youth to vote for city councillors and school trustees. Others join groups such as Amnesty International or attend conferences to address social issues such as HIV/AIDS or homelessness. The involvement of these young people is necessarily based on an ideology or worldview. As you explore the following two chapters, reflect on how your ideology shapes your view on issues and your decision to take action. Consider also how this section helps you to answer the Key Issue for this course, *To what extent should we embrace an ideology?*

Visit the Learn Alberta site [www.LearnAlberta.ca](http://www.LearnAlberta.ca) and click on the *Perspectives on Ideology* learning object for fully interactive learning scenarios entitled ExCite (Exploring Citizenship). These scenarios related to issues and concepts in the Student Resource enhance learning.

