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SPECIAL TO: The Waterloo Chronicle

Charter of Rights may disappoint many,

Roy Romanow warns in lecture at Laurier

In its brief history, Canada's new Charter of Rights and Freedoms has done less for individual rights than many people suppose, and may not in itself be a vehicle for solving the social problems facing Canada.

So said Roy Romanow, former attorney-general for Saskatchewan and a politician closely involved with the charter since its inception, as he delivered the 12th annual Easton-McCarney memorial lecture, a presentation of Wilfrid Laurier University's social work faculty, last week on campus.

"The charter contains only very general language," he said. "Its protection can be sought by the privileged, as well as by the disadvantaged.

"It will, without doubt, be argued that the charter protects the rights of corporations to operate without interference of consumer-protection legislation, that it prohibits political activity by trade unions, perhaps even that it is incompatible with progressive taxation."

He said the charter could be an instrument for social progress but not unless concerned Canadians work together to make sure it meets the aspirations of Canadians.

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Interpretation of the charter will be left to judges, and judges he said, are often seen to be, and sometimes are, insensitive to the interests of certain classes.

"The life experience of most judges naturally enables them better to understand the interests of the economic and political status quo, and privileged groups in positions of leadership.

He said he may sound too pessimistic but that it was becoming clear that the charter may be doing less for the individual, the worker and the agencies that work on their behalf than it has done for those that have always enjoyed political and economic power in Canada.

"The point that I wish to make is that the existence of the charter has not obviated the political role but, in fact, may heighten the importance of the political process."