

# Community Dispatch

An InfoFax of the Halton Social Planning Council & Volunteer Centre

December, 2002

Vol. 7, No. 1

## REDEEMING THE PUBLIC PURPOSE- THE REAL REVOLUTION IS YET TO COME

*On behalf of the Halton Social Planning Council, I would like to extend our Seasons Greetings and our best wishes for a New Year that brings peace and justice to all.*

*This Community Dispatch continues our tradition of sharing the highlights of the keynote address presented at the Council's Annual General meeting. The address at our June 2002 meeting entitled, Redeeming the Public Purpose: The Real Revolution is Yet to Come, was presented by Rev. David Pfrimmer, Director of the Lutheran Office for Public Policy. He examines our political process in terms of the privatization of the public purpose then argues for a revolution that may redeem the public purpose - the politics of hope.*

*The Halton Social Planning Council believes that the thoughts and insights of our speaker will encourage us to pause and reflect on the future of our community and of civic society on the eve of the year 2003.*

*Joey Edwardh,  
Executive Director*

### **Privatizing the Public Purpose – The Politics of Despair**

Our political process is in trouble. There is a pathology of despair that pervades the public square. This Politics of Despair is rooted in the turbulent changes brought on by economic globalization, that cluster of neo-liberal policies of expanded trade, deregulation, and structural adjustment that taken together, has allowed “markets” to dominate our public choices. While I do not intend to speak at length about economic globalization, it is important to understand that it has been eroding the foundations of public life. One of its more notable imperatives is its relentless press to make private that which is public and to commercialize that, which more appropriately should remain private. This relentless press to privatize and commercialize has spawned what I describe as the politics of despair that bears some of the following symptoms:

**1. A Politics of Despair reflects a sense of powerlessness by people** in the face of economic and political forces too large to comprehend. Many people feel they are objects not subjects of their own destiny. Decisions are made about them and not by them. This collective powerlessness breeds a kind of low-grade violence in the body politic.

**2. A Politics of Despair thrives on a growing insecurity among people.** Capital moves freely and must be protected (anti-inflation policies) while people cannot move freely and are abandoned. Juan Somavia, the Chilean diplomat who chaired the United Nation's World Summit on Social Development in 1995, said then, “You cannot have secure nations full of insecure people.” Sadly, since the events of September 11 (World Trade Centre) and October 8 (The War in Afghanistan), the drive for military security has superseded any discussion of what human security requires.

**3. A Politics of Despair breeds a widespread public cynicism** about the commitment of our leaders in all sectors to the “public purpose.” Last week's EKOS poll (May 31, 2002, The Toronto Star) suggests that Canadians believe 57% of large corporations, 46% of federal politicians and 41% of provincial politicians are corrupt. This is not a ringing vote of confidence in our leaders.

**4. A Politics of Despair embraces the atrophy of political imagination** in the public square about what we might accomplish together. Everything seems under attack by the insidious forces of self-interest. The evident distrust of politicians' ability or willingness to preserve and strengthen our much-cherished health care system is palpable in the public mood.

**5. A Politics of Despair results in fewer people being attracted to civic life and public service.** Robert Putnam has documented the decline in overall participation in civic organizations in the United States. He describes the decline in the United States of their social capital (“... the connections among individuals – social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p.19)) and the ensuing loss of “civic vitality” with the apt metaphor of a nation that is “Bowling Alone.”

**6. A Politics of Despair cripples the public discourse into shallow and self-interested nostrums**, divorced from a sense of our history. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death, Public Discourse in an Age of Show Business*, has pointed out that public conversation has become simplistic. He writes, "...we are presented not only with fragmented news but news without context, without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness; that is to say news as pure entertainment." (p.101) This means that the body politic has a limited attention span and is unable to address complex issues with equally serious remedies.

The Politics of Despair is a profoundly spiritual crisis for our nation, for our communities, and more specifically, for the body politic. We have become a society divorced from our national narrative. The late George Grant, one of Canada's most foremost political philosophers, described in an earlier time this national angst in the widely read, *Lament for A Nation*. Grant argued that the Canadian experiment to choose a different path than our cousins to the south had seemingly failed. Today, many people do not have a sense of who they are or what they contribute to our unfolding national story or even that there exists an unfolding story at all. We are becoming a national corporation of consumers, strangers on a turbulent journey with seemingly no collective destination. The politics of despair is far from being a merely passive theoretical or intellectual curiosity. It has had dramatic, very concrete, brutally harsh and real consequences, particularly for vulnerable people (i.e. poor people, children, disabled people, the elderly). One can observe its paralysing effect at various levels of public life. In the international arena, it was evident in the continuing failure to realize any meaningful cancellation of the billions of illegitimate debts of the poorest nations of the world. It has been evident at the federal level in subduing the federal deficit (not the debt) at the expense of the poor and unemployed or in the failure to effectively make any headway in addressing the needs of the one in six Canadians and one in five children who find themselves mired deeper in poverty in the midst of affluence.

While we could explore any of these examples, the Politics of Despair was probably no more evident than right here in Ontario during the past few years as we have been living in the shadow of the "Common Sense Revolution". Riddled with paradox, the Common Sense Revolution heightened the sense of powerlessness many people felt as the government pursued central planning in education, hospital restructuring, and the amalgamation of municipalities. The Common Sense Revolution heightened the insecurity of the vulnerable, alleging widespread fraud among social assistance recipients in spite of no credible evidence, cutting welfare benefits dramatically (that is by 21% six years ago) and disqualifying disabled people from receiving benefits, while showing no shame in allowing salary increases for themselves and

sanctioning huge salaries for CEOs in the private sector. It nurtured public cynicism as the government forged ahead with the plan-of-the-day, with everything from charity casinos to downloading services to municipalities, ignoring or discrediting citizens who raised any questions. Many public interest voluntary organizations disappeared or barely survived while public servants – nurses, teachers, and public sector workers – were demoralized and thousands were laid off or left with the ensuing consequences such as Walkerton. And our public discourse on important issues such as education and health care and the sale of Hydro One, has been reduced to paid political commercials trying to convince us that what was bad was good and what was good was bad.

The "Common Sense Revolution" was neither. For it was contemptuous of rational argument and evidenced-based decision making. To this day, the government has done no studies to tell us where the 600,000 people on welfare went. Common sense was invoked to foreclose discussion just as one uses it in a debate when all arguments fail and we are left to say, "It is just common sense!" Neither was it revolutionary. Much of its thinking and ideas dominated the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was a one note song – tax cuts – and a slick platform to privatize the public purpose. Hardly a revolution, it was more like a coup to restore power to traditional interests. Those who claim the revolutionary mantle for themselves rarely are. Premier Eves will be wise to dramatically change course, what remains to be seen is if he can.

### **A Politics of Hope – The Real Revolution is Yet to Come**

One might be pessimistic about the future but on the contrary, I have some real hope. The ideological economic captivity of the public purpose is showing signs of cracking. Redeeming the public purpose will be difficult but not impossible. A more authentic revolution may be brewing just beneath our view.

Dramatic change is not new in human communities. History is full of examples of such change where centres of creative hope have emerged and have set the course and created the institutional foundation for much of what would develop as "western European civilization".

Reflecting on this history caused me to ask, where are the **creative centres of hope** in our time? From where will the redemption of the public purpose come? I doubt that it will come through our political institutions (Parliament, Political Parties etc). The redemption of the public purpose – the real revolution – will begin with some of the 180,000 Canadian voluntary organizations, the estimated 28,000 international

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the millions of domestic organizations in other countries which taken together we call “civil society”. Among all the other things they do, they will need to help us recognize that politics is not genuine politics if it is left to politicians. Politics is the way as a society we make decisions about what to do together. The public purpose is too important to be left to legislators alone!

“Civil society” traces its roots to the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The idea of “civil society” was born in a time when there was a crisis in the “social order”. Civil society was those “mediating institutions” that stood as a bulwark between the state with its overwhelming power that could threaten the well being of individuals. In a time where the threat to individuals and communities is the abuse of economic power, civil society may have a new role in serving as both a bulwark against such abuses and, equally important, as a means to restoring the role and capacity of government to safeguard the public purpose.

Now I am not so naive as to believe that “civil society” is not without some challenges and some of its own problems. Civil society’s authenticity and thus its contribution will depend on its ability to represent constituencies, to articulate credible proposals and ideas, and it will need to model the participatory decision making it often advocates. These organizations do have a demonstrated record on these questions but they will need to remain watchful.

For a Politics of Hope to take hold, civil society (and political institutions as well) will need to engage in what I would call, “public confidence building measures” to help Canadians see an alternative to the Politics of Despair. Civil Society does seem well positioned in the public mind to take on this role. For example, in an interesting Decima poll a few years ago, when asked, over 60% of Canadians – compared to governments (approx. 13%) and business (approx. 12%) – believed the voluntary sector would be the source of “new approaches” to address social issues because they were not motivated by personal gain.

Albert Einstein is reported to have once said, “The problems of this world cannot be resolved by the same level of thinking that created them.” A Politics of Hope that helps us redeem the public purpose will need to provoke us into thinking differently. Let me turn briefly to some of the specific ways civil society can contribute to thinking differently. To be Centres of Hope, Civil Society Organizations need to engage in the following:

**1. Centres of Hope need to be Centres of Resistance.** Resistance can vary from being sceptical and challenging claims made by our leaders, to taking part in demonstrations in the street. Let me be clear that I am speaking about non-

violent resistance. Much has been made of the violence that can accompany these events. But one should be impressed by the commitment of many of the people, notably young people, who organized important parallel events to discuss in quite sophisticated ways, alternative proposals. In an EKOS poll released at the time of the Summit of the Americas in Quebec in 2001, 58% of those surveyed said that the protesters raised valid issues and 39% said that the anti-globalization message was getting through to them. Civil Society must help foster such creative and constructive dissent.

**2. Centres of Hope need to be Centres of Public Truth-Telling.** “Governments,” as one Member of Parliament once told me, “like things ‘fuzzy.’” Civil society organizations can be helpful in detailing the impact of public policies and providing important information for decision makers and the public. During much of the 1980s in Central America, church human rights organizations like the Inter-Church Committee for Human Rights in Latin America (ICCHRLA) provided the government and the United Nations with important documentation on the gross and systematic violations in countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras. As one government member confessed, this was an important source of information for policy making since Canadian leaders often were inundated with biased information from the Government of the United States. Similarly, in Ontario the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC), held hearings across the province where poor people themselves could describe the impact of the Harris government’s welfare policies. These brought to public scrutiny the government’s grossly misleading claims that they were “offering a hand up” not a “hand out.”

**3. Centres for Hope need to be Centres of New Ideas** for a “People-Centred Public Agenda.” Here voluntary groups can help break the intellectual captivity of the public purpose to the logic of globalization. It is scandalous that there have been no new national social initiatives – during one of the periods of greatest economic prosperity. Yet through organizations like Campaign 2000, civil society put forward proposals that led to a National Children’s Agenda – inadequate though it may be. Similarly it was the churches that put the issue of debt cancellation on the agenda of the G-8 leaders with the signatures of some 17 million people worldwide, 650,000 in Canada alone (1 in 50 Canadians) – again with politicians failing to make significant progress in spite of the good ideas offered.

**4. Centres of Hope need to be Centres of Ethical Formation, Nurture and Deliberation that leads to action.** In some ways there is an “ethics crisis” in our nation not just for politicians. But where do our values come from? How are they nurtured and integrated into a way of acting? And importantly, how do we discuss them and see how they are

applied to the problems we face? Ironically at a time when there has been a renaissance in religion and spirituality, according to people like Reginald Bibby (*Restless Gods, The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*, Stoddart, 2002), the vitality of our religious institutions seem under a shadow. Faith communities, in my view need to be communities of moral formation, nurture, deliberation and action! Redeeming the public purpose may require the redemption of our religious organizations.

**5. Centres of Hope need to be Centres of Political Reformation.** Civil Society must support political reforms in our Parliamentary system. At Queen's Park and in Ottawa we have seen a managerial style of governance. Many people seek public office for very noble reasons. We need to honour their vocation and explore and implement ways to revitalize our legislative institutions. This may mean more "free votes," a greater role for committees, and proportional representation, and the elimination of corporations and unions as the underwriters of our political processes. As well, we will need to encourage individual participation and financial contributions to political parties. Conversely, the federal government should allow charitable organizations to use a greater percentage – the 50% as was proposed instead of the current 10% – of their resources for non-partisan political engagement.

**6. Centres of Hope need to Enforce Greater Standards of Corporate Social Responsibility.** Networks of civil society through the rapidly growing corporate social responsibility movement, already have woven a web that is having a restraining impact on business practices. Here I think of the work the churches have been doing on the issue of Talisman Energy and its complicity in supporting the war in Sudan. Canadians are supportive. As Broadbent discovered, 75% of

Canadians (78% of shareholders) think governments should not make purchases from companies with a bad record of social responsibility, and even more, (84%) want government to promote international agreements to "set minimum enforceable standards for socially responsible corporate behaviour in their overseas operations." (*The New Balance Sheet – Corporate Profits and Responsibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Executive Summary of the Report of the Canadian Democracy and Corporate Accountability Commission, January 2002.)

**7. Centres of Hope must be Centres that Strengthen the Bonds of Human Solidarity.** Civil society organizations have one other very important contribution and that is the connections they make between people means that people are no longer strangers. Suffering, injustice, oppression, poverty, and exploitation – whether across the street or around the world – has a face and a name. Redeeming the public purpose will require individual leadership from civil society (and I would add the religious community as well.) But those leaders will be stronger when accompanied by a friendship with others – a bond of human solidarity tied to a noble purpose.

A Politics of Hope can press us in our work to redeem the public purpose where people are able to care for people, where neighbours are indeed neighbours, and where communities do sustain communities. And that, I believe, would be a real revolution!

† SEASONS GREETINGS AND †  
 † A HAPPY NEW YEAR! †  
 † PEACE IN 2003! †

Produced by the Halton Social Planning Council & Volunteer Centre  
 760 Brant Street, Suite 406  
 Burlington, Ontario L7R 4B7  
 (905) 632-1975, (905) 878-0955; Fax: (905) 632-0778;  
 E-mail: [office@haltonspcvc.on.ca](mailto:office@haltonspcvc.on.ca) Web site: <http://www.haltonspcvc.on.ca>



A United Way Agency