

In Diversity, with Faith, Coming Together for Justice

A speech given at each of the eight 40th Anniversary celebrations of Citizens for Public Justice and the Public Justice Resource Centre

by Harry J. Kits, Executive Director

Sometimes, despite the real potential of Canada, the inherent goodness of creation and the bounty of this fine country, when we face the challenges of the day, the public mood, our mood, can swing hard to cynicism. Sometimes it swings to intolerance, or to apathy, when it seems solutions are impossible and there's no room to engage. People often feel overwhelmed. What can we do anyway?

For those of us involved with Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) and the Public Justice Resource Centre (PJRC), our faith calls out from beyond apathy or powerlessness. It calls us to open ourselves to our common humanity, our calling to love God by loving our neighbour, including in our political life together. So together, we have adopted the perspective of public justice. It is a perspective vision that helps us not to be lured into false dichotomies, or black-and-white positions when they are not necessary. We see the need for healing steps to be taken. We see real people suffering real hardships, that concrete policies and prophetic vision can alleviate. That's the call of public justice, the call from God for the kind of government which Romans 13 says is "for our good." Justice for all, an economy of care, the joining together of all circles of society for the well-being of all and for the common good. Public Justice.

Public Justice is the banner under which PJRC does research and education, identifying core values in policy discussions, animating emerging themes in public discourse, and creating documents that bring the light of faith to these values and current topics.

Public justice is the standard under which CPJ promotes particular policy alternatives, offering a way forward for public engagement, providing direct advocacy to mainly federal decision-makers, organizing political interventions in Ottawa.

CPJ and PJRC – two approaches, two mandates, one perspective from which to go forward.

So how does this two-part, faith-based Christian organization address the challenges laid before us?

I know that some of those who have become our partners in various coalitions and initiatives have felt a bit uncomfortable about our being so upfront about the Christian vision that drives us. That is understandable, because we all know examples of how faith-based public visions can be inappropriate, but also because we are part of a culture that tries to stifle such faith-based expressions, and often ridicules them.

So speaking out of faith is challenging. We continue to need to learn together how these expressions can best contribute to the common good.

In fact, people of faith often need to challenge each other about whether specific political choices are consistent with their faith commitments. Christians need to challenge each other about how their shared faith commitment leads some to propose policies that cause suffering to other citizens and damage to the environment, and others to argue for a greater role for government in the public good. Christians must do this, just as Muslims need to challenge each other about the meaning of the Prophet's teachings for public life in Canada today, and just as Jewish believers need to wrestle with the Torah and one another about how governments need to act today.

Of course, in the midst of bringing these deepest commitments out of the closet into public life, we must ensure that they are not used as fighting tools. Too often the temptation for people of faith, including those who hold to a secular faith, is to try to impose a sense of "just us" rather than "justice." We try to use the government to impose a particular religious point of view to the exclusion of others. In that way, faith commitments lose credibility and no longer enrich the common good.

Faith commitments, indeed all ways of understanding the world, must engage each other in the public square to help shape the common good. They need to influence the shaping of public values that can be the basis of policies contributing to the well-being of all and the integrity of creation. This open and respectful wrestling around core commitments needs to be the hallmark of democracy in a pluralistic country like Canada.

So CPJ and PJRC are unabashed about the Christian impetus that drives our work. It is something that shapes our vision, gives us coherence, and has provided us with a long-standing framework for addressing the multiplicity of policies we have taken on over the past 40 years. It allows us to continue to strive to meet our mission. It allows us to make a credible enough contribution that we can continue to work with partners who may not share our specific religious vision, but who share our commitment to public justice and the common good.

40 years ago, just as CPJ and PJRC began, Martin Luther King wrote a letter from the Birmingham jail. He said in that letter, that "We are called to be thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society, not thermometers that merely record or register the temperature of majority opinion." I trust that we have been blessed to have played some small part in setting the temperature of Canada over the past 40 years.

A 40th anniversary is a significant time, a time that calls to mind both roots and change.

Looking back over those 40 years gives us cause for celebration. We have worked through different political times, with an ever-developing support community, and with an increasingly diverse group of co-workers. We have consistently sought new ways of understanding, of articulating, and of practising the biblical call to advocate and do justice. We have sought new ways of expressing political love for our neighbours and the creation

around us.

The core perspectives remain, but nuances have varied over time, policy issues have come and gone – sometimes from the larger political agenda, sometimes just from our own agenda. There have been differences among us about the practical policies we advocate, some more difficult than others. What we hope is that our common public-justice vision holds us together to keep talking, to keep searching, and to keep seeking healing steps.

I celebrate the increasing diversity of our support community, staff and board, and look forward to that diversity continuing and growing. Keeping our eye on the unity of vision for public justice, we can join hands together to speak in a wider voice, in different colours, and with different accents.

It may seem overwhelming. But, on the other hand, will it be different than in the early 1960s, when a small group of people, many newly arrived immigrants, thought they could help make a contribution to Canada by starting what became CPJ and PJRC?

Paul Loeb in the book *Soul of a Citizen* argues that “we don’t have to be saints,” but instead should aim to be “good-enough activists” who “take one step at a time.” In other words, we should not look on the media stars of social change, the Prime Minister or Premier, as the only ones who can effect change. Stories abound about people who took small steps that built on the small steps of others, and who, sometimes over decades, were able to effect change.

May we each in our own place in life, and together through CPJ and PJRC, take up the challenges to advance public justice, and to let justice flow for the next 40 years.

We thank God for the blessing of all of you – a loyal supporting community. Thank you for celebrating with us tonight.

We continue to feel blessed by God who has sustained these organizations in good times and bad, and has given them an opportunity to be a blessing in Canadian society.

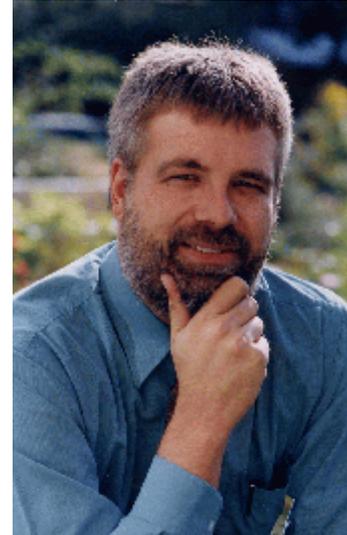
We rely on your continued prayers, participation, challenges, and financial support as we go forward, past and future together.

Thank You.

Harry J. Kits

Harry has been executive director of Citizens for Public Justice and the Public Justice Resource Centre since 1988. He has shepherded the organization through a variety of staff changes and organizational developments while maintaining its core commitments to faith-based public policy development and advocacy. In this leadership role, Harry has been able to demonstrate his quick and thorough grasp of issues and his considerable experience in organizational development and fundraising.

A frequent speaker at public meetings and conferences, Harry also conducts workshops and seminars on public policy issues. Harry has written numerous articles for various books, magazines and newspapers.



Harry's academic background is especially strong in the areas of multiculturalism, pluralism, faith and public policy, and political theory. Harry received his B.A. in Political Science from Dordt College, Iowa and his M.Phil.F. in Political Theory from the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto. His particular interest is pluralism.



Public Justice Resource Centre

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PJRC, founded in 1963, is a research and education organization that responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship in the understanding and discussion of core values and faith perspectives in Canadian public policy debates. It works closely with its sister organization, Citizens for Public Justice.



CITIZENS for PUBLIC JUSTICE

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CPJ is a national, non-partisan organization that promotes justice in Canadian public affairs. CPJ responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship through research, education and advocacy. CPJ works closely with its sister organization, the Public Justice Resource Centre.

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