

ELECTION 2008: Where are we now?

By Chandra Pasma

After our \$300 million exercise in democracy and citizenship this fall, it's important to assess the impact of the federal election. What did Election 2008 achieve? Where are we now? And how are we called to respond?

When this election was called, there was a lot of cynicism: how much was really going to change? Polls weren't showing significant changes in voter preferences from the last election, and it generally seemed like no party was capturing the public imagination.

In fact, fewer than 30 seats changed hands between parties, and we found ourselves with an almost identical Conservative government. The policy direction of the country seemed essentially unchanged.

The advocacy context also seemed largely the same, although the Liberal leadership race, Parliamentary processes and political manoeuvrings may offer some interesting dynamics to our nation's federal political scene.

The impact of this election

It seemed tempting to believe in the days following the election that the whole process didn't make any difference. But in reality, there were some big issues and disturbing trends in both the campaign and its results.

The most shocking trend is the lowest voter turnout in Canadian history. At 59.1%, more than one-third of eligible voters chose not to cast a ballot. It appears there were a variety of reasons for this appallingly low turnout, but such a significant challenge to our democracy's health means we need to have conversations about our political

- The 59.1% voter turnout was lowest in Canadian history
- Fewer than 30 seats changed hands between parties
- The number of female MPs increased by only 4, to 22%



PHOTO: Mariel Angus

During the federal election campaign, CPJ co-ordinated a debate on poverty and inequality. Here Jen Hunter (Green Party), Martha Hall Findley (Liberal Party), Françoise Boivin (NDP) and Réal Ménard (Bloc Québécois) discuss poverty reduction. See page 2.

culture and citizen engagement.

The increased profile given to strategic voting and vote swapping during the campaign, as people used Facebook and dedicated strategic voting websites to plan or swap their vote, also seems noteworthy. Together with the low voter turnout, it clearly suggests that the time has come to consider electoral reform. Our electoral system is leaving many Canadians feeling disengaged and disenfranchised.

This is compounded by the fact that over 60% of Canadian voters did not vote for the Conservatives. The current system stifles desire for change and limits capacity to address issues except in a narrow, partisan way.

The incremental gains made in representation by women and visible minorities show the challenges they face in our electoral system. While we have a record number of female

MPs, there was an increase of only four seats from the last parliament, to a total of 22% of the House of Commons. Visible minorities are similarly represented at a rate well below their proportion of the population.

The slow, difficult progress made by women and visible minorities in achieving gains in representation also points to the option of electoral reform. But perhaps it is also time to consider other methods of facilitating equality, such as quotas for candidates or tying public financing to a party's records on including and supporting women and visible minorities.

What happened to the issues?

The ways in which big issues were dealt with – or not dealt with at all – during the campaign also raises questions about the future health of Canadian democracy.

For the first time in Canadian history, the environment was an election issue. At the beginning of the campaign, voters

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Round-up

Election action

The federal election campaign kept CPJ very busy. With our popular election bulletin and weekly email updates through Ola!, we challenged CPJ members to ask their candidates tough questions.

During the campaign, we co-ordinated an all-party debate on poverty and inequality with 31 other justice organizations. Over 300 people attended the debate held in Ottawa, and candidates from all major parties (except the Conservative Party, which did not reply to the invitation or send a representative) engaged in a lively conversation about how to address poverty in Canada.

Continuing advocacy

How can we continue to be active citizens after the election? This was the question that policy analyst **Chandra Pasma** explored with students at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ont. Answering their questions on what it means to live out hopeful citizenship, Chandra encouraged the students to use their voices for change.

Chandra also visited the Grade 6 classes of John Knox Christian School in Oakville. They were learning about NGOs, so Chandra shared with them the work of CPJ and talked of her experience working for an NGO.

Poverty reduction

On October 17, the International Day for the Elimination of Poverty, CPJ joined other anti-poverty organizations and supporters to Stand Up against poverty. Similar events occurred around the world, highlighting this important issue. CPJ's socio-economic policy analyst, **Karri Munn-Venn**, spoke of the urgent and seri-

ous action needed to reduce poverty in Canada.

Chandra attended the Day of Encouragement in Hamilton, Ont., organized by Diaconal Ministries Canada in October.

She led participants through CPJ's Envisioning Canada without Poverty workshop, noting the unique role faith communities can play in speaking out for justice.

Ecological care

During September, CPJ's executive director, **Joe Gunn**, was the main speaker at a conference entitled "Pilgrims with the Earth" in Prince George, BC. Here, he presented five keynote addresses on the relationship of Christian faith and the need for ecological conversion.

In October, 60 people gathered in Humboldt, SK to hear Joe's presentation, "The Ecological Crisis: What Would Jesus Save?" Joe also spoke at the annual meeting of the diocese of Prince Albert about how faith communities must care for creation in all we do.

In Edmonton, board members **Jim Jooisse** and **Mark Huyser-Wierenga**, along with other volunteers, organized an evening discussion around environmental concerns, focusing on the tar sands. Joe opened the event, and was followed by **John Hiemstra**, who spoke about how a public justice lens can help us understand the complex issues surrounding the oil sands. With over 100 people in attendance, the discussion was filled with thoughtful questions.

Faith in Diversity

On October 28, CPJ hosted a lecture by Jonathan Chaplin at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. Jonathan spoke to the crowd of 70 people about how people of faith can live with integrity and solidarity in a multicultural, pluralist

society. Addressing the overflowing room, Jonathan acknowledged the complexity of pluralism, stressing the importance of creating a space for respectful dialogue between groups.



Darryl Exelby, Mariel Angus, Karri Munn-Venn and Danielle Tracey – welcome to these new CPJ staff!

PHOTO: Karen Diepeveen/CPJ

Welcome

CPJ is excited to welcome four new staff members. **Karri Munn-Venn** is our new socio-economic policy analyst, coming to us with a strong background in policy analysis and government relations.

Mariel Angus joined us as our 2008-2009 policy intern. A recent graduate of the University of Guelph, Mariel has been researching pluralism and contributed to our federal election coverage.

We are also glad to welcome **Danielle Tracey**, a student at Trinity Western University's Laurentian Leadership Centre in Ottawa. She has been analyzing the growing income gap in Canada.

The most recent addition to the CPJ team is **Darryl Exelby**, our Membership and Development Officer. Currently living with his family in Abbotsford, BC, Darryl brings much enthusiasm and fundraising experience to the CPJ team.

Extend a word of welcome to the new CPJ staff when you have the opportunity to do so!

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<p>Undeliverable copies of <i>the Catalyst</i> should be returned to: Citizens for Public Justice, 309 Cooper St., #501 Ottawa, ON K2P 0G5</p>	<p><i>The Catalyst</i>, a publication of Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ), reports on public justice issues in Canada and reviews CPJ activities. Please contact us if you wish to reprint material.</p> <p>EDITOR: Karen Diepeveen DESIGNER: Eric Mills</p>	<p>CPJ's mission is to promote public justice in Canada by shaping key public policy debates through research and analysis, publishing and public dialogue. CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God's call for love, justice and stewardship.</p> <p>CPJ membership fee: \$50/\$25 low-income, includes <i>the Catalyst</i>.</p>



Children's rights: first call for Parliament

By Kathy Vandergrift

Protecting the rights of children sometimes brings opposing forces together in conflict zones. A campaign to immunize all children, for example, can motivate armies to create a peace zone for a limited time. Protecting children's rights in Canada could be a focus for common action between opposing political parties in this fractious House of Commons following a bitter election. All Canadians would benefit as a result.

Canada's record

In January 2009, Canada must present its third official report on its implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The report goes to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, but the issues outlined in the report need to be addressed in Canada. Parliament could show leadership by making these issues a priority. After all, protecting children's rights is one of government's most basic tasks.

In 2003, Canada had its second review on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Six recommendations were put forward on how Canada could end discrimination that leaves some children behind. However, little action was taken and no leadership was shown, despite Canada's original and significant commitment to the Convention and putting children first.

The Convention was ratified almost 20 years ago with support across the political spectrum. Then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney co-chaired the first World Summit for Children in 1990. World leaders at the summit established the principle of first call for children, based on the commitment that "the essential needs of children should be given high priority in the allocation of resources, in bad times as well as good times, at national and international as well as at family levels."

A generation has grown up since the Convention was adopted, but "at the ground level, children's rights are being pushed to the side and violated in a variety of situations." This is the finding of a 2007 study by the Senate Human Rights Committee entitled *Children: The Silen-*

ced Citizens. Unfortunately, the report was buried in a partisan battle about how to select senators. Children, who have no voice in our political system, lost out again instead of being the first call.

The first-call principle is consistent with Biblical teachings about putting justice first. Throughout Scripture, doing justice for children is one of the tests for how well a community lives out God's

Justice involves protecting the most vulnerable.



intentions for creation. A society that works for children will work for everyone. That is why Jesus put a child in the middle of disciples fighting about their rank in the kingdom.

Respecting children's rights

Why should children's rights be respected in Canada?

Consider Jordan, a First Nations child who spent two years in an active treatment hospital instead of home care because federal and provincial governments could not decide who should pay for home care. If the child's best interests came first, as the Convention says, jurisdictional issues would have been resolved after Jordan had gone home. Jordan died before the dispute was resolved.

Unfortunately, there are many children like Jordan. But federal and provincial governments still refuse to adopt what is being called Jordan's principle: put children's best interests first and settle jurisdictional issues later.

Many more young people are victims of violence than perpetrators of it. A national strategy to end violence against children should get attention from all parties. Instead, parties are not likely to come together: the debate is more likely to focus on longer jail sentences for a few 14-year-old serious offenders. If citizens under the age of 18 had a voice in national affairs, ending violence against children would be a top priority.

The discrimination identified in the second review has yet to be addressed. In 2007, the Auditor General reported that funding for children in Aboriginal child welfare programs is inequitable compared with funding for non-Aboriginal children in similar situations. If the best interests of children come first, this would be resolved without forcing Aboriginal groups to go through all the hoops of a formal judicial process, as they now must do.

If children's rights were taken seriously in Canada, children would be treated equitably regardless of race or place of residence. Children with disabilities, children living on the street, and refugee children are other vulnerable groups that the 2007 Senate report named for urgent attention.

One child out of every nine grows up in poverty. 40 percent of them live with a parent who works full time but does not earn enough for rent, food, child care and school fees. 37 percent of food bank clients are children. Closing the gap in life chances for these children should be a top priority across party lines.

Once again the economic crisis could be used as an excuse to avoid the issue of children's rights, as deficit reduction was used in the 1990s. Now, the challenge to all parties is to stabilize the economy without shifting the burden to the most vulnerable citizens. A first call to protect the rights of children, especially the most vulnerable, could be a non-partisan starting point. It would illustrate a different way of doing politics, one more in keeping with the promise of Scripture: do justice and things will go well in the land.

CPJ board chair Kathy Vandergrift recently received the 2008 Aldo Farina Child Rights and Advocacy Prize, an international award recognizing outstanding and sustained leadership in child rights advocacy and education for development, awarded by the national committees of UNICEF.

CPJ launches new website!

On October 9, CPJ members, staff, board members, partner organizations and local election candidates gathered to celebrate the launch and new look of CPJ's website, www.cpj.ca. We also officially introduced our new advocacy toolkit. Words of welcome were given by Joe Gunn, CPJ's executive director, followed with a prayer by board member Lisa Chisholm-Smith.

CPJ summer student Maria van Geest, author of CPJ's new advocacy toolkit, spoke about this exciting new resource now available on-line. CPJ's communication technology specialist, Michael Krakowiak, then talked about the new features found on www.cpj.ca.

"The new website is a great way for Canadians across the country to engage in public justice dialogue," Michael said. "Our new blog, updated daily, will address justice issues as they emerge. And the search feature is very effective. There are so many more tools available – I encourage everyone to come and check out the new www.cpj.ca!"

Board chair Kathy Vandergrift also commented about the importance of expanding and continuing the public justice dialogue across the country. "CPJ is well-positioned to connect with people about issues of injustice," she said, "and the website's new resources will help facilitate this discussion."

CPJ policy staff are also excited about the new website. "It was a great tool during the election campaign," said policy analyst Chandra Pasma. "The website has also given us an outlet to comment on issues as they develop and change daily. And the blog is a good tool for members to give us feedback on our work, which is always helpful."

"Having such an accessible and informative advocacy toolkit is also beneficial," added Karri Munn-Venn, socio-economic policy analyst. "CPJ supporters and many others across the country are finding it a very useful resource in their advocacy activities."

Michael will continue working on the website, developing a community forum as an outlet for members to discuss public justice issues in their communities across Canada, and to share their experiences of speaking out for change.

We encourage you to explore our new website and expand the dialogue around living out hopeful citizenship.



What's new?

Blogs – updated daily, our blog addresses emerging and relevant issues – and gives you the space to comment and engage with us

Advocacy toolkit – this comprehensive resource gives you the tools to have

a public voice on issues you care about
Easy searching – our new search feature gives detailed and accurate results
RSS feeds – get immediate updates on our work and what we're talking about ...and much more!
 Visit www.cpj.ca and see how our website is useful for you!

Passionate about public justice? Interested in serving on the CPJ board?

CPJ welcomes board nominations for the following geographic areas for our 2009 Spring elections:

- Alberta South
- North and Eastern Ontario

CPJ members with accounting or financial experience are particularly encouraged to apply.

Join this group of dedicated Canadians – nominate yourself or a fellow CPJ member today!

Send nominations to Karen Diepeveen at karen@cpj.ca or 501 – 309 Cooper St., Ottawa, ON, K2P 0G5 by **January 9, 2009.**

For more information, please contact Karen at karen@cpj.ca or 1-800-667-8046 ext. 225.

Launching the new site

CPJ members, board, staff, election candidates and friends celebrated CPJ's new website and advocacy toolkit on October 9. At right, Green Party candidate Jen Hunter talks with CPJ executive director Joe Gunn.



Communication technology specialist Michael Krakowiak highlights the new features of CPJ's website, and the vision of dialogue and engagement behind its development.

PHOTOS: Mariel Angus



Chandra Pasma, Danielle Tracey, Mariel Angus and Joe Gunn with board member Lisa Chisholm Smith, the Reverend Susan C. Johnson and the Most Reverend Fred J. Hiltz.

Millennium Development walk

By Mariel Angus

On September 25, CPJ staff joined Anglican and Evangelical Lutheran church leaders and other community members for an ecumenical “Walk of Witness” in Ottawa. This walk, in support of the Millennium Development Goals, was part of a day of prayer, fasting and witness in solidarity with those living in hunger and poverty around the world.

The goals were adopted in 2000 by world leaders at the United Nations. They are part of the Millennium Declaration, an agreement outlining eight goals related to human development – such as reducing global poverty and hunger – for nations to achieve by the year 2015.

World leaders met again on September 25, 2008 to assess the progress made and to renew their

commitments to achieving the goals by 2015.

The Walk of Witness began at noon and wound its way through downtown Ottawa, stopping at various monuments to pray for the achievement of each goal. It ended at the United Nations Association in Canada (which shares an office building with CPJ!). A joint public statement was read by Archbishop Fred Hiltz, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Rev. Susan Johnson, National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

The walk was a meaningful way to acknowledge the commitments our world leaders have made towards ending global poverty, and reminded us of the work that must still be done to ensure that these promises are kept.

Mariel Angus is CPJ’s policy intern.

CPJ members raise poverty issue with MPs

As part of CPJ’s Envisioning Canada without Poverty campaign, CPJ members have been visiting their elected representatives to discuss poverty in Canada and encourage them to support a poverty reduction strategy.

One CPJ member, Anton Brink of London, Ontario, has met with both his MP, Irene Mathysen, and his provincial elected representative. As part of the Public Justice Committee at Good News Christian Reformed Church, Anton and others have set up several visits and engaged in productive conversations.

He says, “Meeting your MP may seem intimidating; however, we’ve found ours to be very cordial and open to discussion. Citizen involvement is an encouragement to them, and may actually cause them to consider other angles on issues. Meeting your MP permits you to be involved in the political process in a small but real way, and is a good opportunity to let a Christian witness be heard in Canada’s political arena.”

After Anton met with Mathysen, CPJ staff Chandra Pasma, Trixie Ling and Maria van Geest organized a follow-up meeting. “We were able to pass along more detailed policy information,” said Chandra. “And we reiterated Anton’s call for Ms. Mathysen and her party to commit to a federal poverty reduction strategy.”

Taking action

Other CPJ members across the country have sent an email or letter to their MP, getting varied responses. We encourage you to engage in this hopeful citizenship – together, our voices can speak out and make a change.

For information on writing to or visiting your MP about poverty reduction in Canada, visit our website www.canadawithoutpoverty.ca or call us at 1-800-667-8046. You’ll find tips on contacting your MP, as well as detailed information about poverty reduction.

Keep sending us your letters and let us know about your visit to your MP! We can follow up on your meetings, sharing policy options and emphasizing the importance of a federal poverty reduction strategy.

By sharing our experiences, we encourage each other to take action and speak out for public justice in Canada.



CPJ now has an online advocacy toolkit!

Does a political decision or piece of legislation concern you, but you aren’t sure what to do about it? CPJ’s new advocacy toolkit can give you tips on how to get started, what kinds of actions you can take, and how to most effectively carry through with those actions. The toolkit contains information such as:

- How to develop an advocacy strategy
- How to meet with your MP and decide what to say
- When and how to engage in the legislative process
- Sample petitions, letters and press releases
- . . . and much more!

To view the toolkit, visit our website: www.cpj.ca.
To order a hard copy, call CPJ at 1-800-6678046
or email cpj@cpj.ca

Serious issues shouldn't just fade away

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named the environment as one of the three biggest issues they were concerned about in an Angus Reid poll. However, the environment ultimately didn't seem to affect the outcome, falling victim to the focus on the economy.

Will this affect whether the environment is addressed by political parties in future campaigns? Do political parties believe Canadians will not vote according to their concerns about the environment? Did Canadians opt only for regulation of carbon emissions, or will we see cap-and-trade or carbon taxes resurface as policy options?

Similarly, poverty and other social concerns did not seem to be issues at all, though several political party platforms explicitly committed to action. Poverty was not even addressed in the leaders' debates. Does this say to political parties that Canadians will not vote according to poverty and other social issues, but only on short-term economic self-interest?

This election saw some political parties avoiding public debates, refusing to send candidates or not responding to public questions. Other parties were explicitly excluded: only after citizens and organizations like CPJ challenged the exclusion of the Green Party were they included in the leaders' debates. How do we encourage genuine debate and democratic dialogue that allows voters to participate and truly understand their options in this context?

When the media focuses on trivialities like gaffes or puffin poop, how do we encourage Canadians to understand and engage with serious issues?

The role of CPJ

How do we respond to these outcomes of our election and the way they will shape our future?

CPJ's vision is a world in which individuals, communities, societal institutions

and governments all contribute to and benefit from the common good. Voter disengagement, cynicism, marginalized voices, inattention to key public justice issues, and lack of serious political debate all challenge this vision.

In this context, CPJ's role seems important more than ever. Canadians need to be encouraged to participate in public dialogue about the big issues, what kind of country we want, and what kind of citizens we want to be. Our desire is to help citizens engage in elections in meaningful ways, and communicate with their decision mak-

ers and each other between elections.

As Canadians, we need to be thinking of big picture questions of who we are and where we can go together as a country. We must reflect on our core values, dream about our common future, and articulate our aspirations to our leaders. We must ask how we can inculcate our political involvement with values of justice, care and compassion for each other and for creation.

At CPJ, one of our goals is to empower citizens to participate in public debate by helping them stay informed on important public justice issues and key policy debates. We provide opportunities to engage in direct advocacy, like our Envisioning Canada Without Poverty campaign. And our new advocacy toolkit offers guidance on how to take action.

We also serve as a voice for our members in the political sphere, reminding politicians and decision makers to address important issues in a respectful, democratic and

just way. Focusing on short-term electoral advantage is a dangerous habit for our common life together.

We speak out in the media. During the election campaign, we received an average of three media hits per week, commenting on the campaign and highlighting public justice issues.

Finally, we offer Canadians a space to engage in conversations for the common good. Canadians need to share their views, be challenged and inspired by others, dream together, know when to be prophetic and when to compromise.

Canadians don't all hold the same beliefs, values, policy goals or priorities, and neither do Christians. Part of citizenship engagement is being willing to debate, ready to teach but willing to learn. Our new website provides a space for that kind of participation, with a new blog, community forum, and the opportunity for you to post comments.

Although an important element of our country's life together, elections are only one part of the public policy process. The hard work of dialogue, education and advocacy takes place between elections.

This recent election highlights important concerns about our country's future that need to be dealt with now. Electoral reform, environmental devastation, confronting major social issues like poverty, the importance of democratic dialogue and participation – all of these issues should not fade from the political forum now that the election has passed.

CPJ will continue to educate Canadians on poverty and advocate for a poverty reduction strategy, to explore alternatives like the Guaranteed Livable Income, to critique important structures like the

tax system, to encourage fairness and welcome for newcomers, to support the rights of Aboriginals, to promote environmental care, and to challenge and encourage Canadians to be good neighbours in the midst of diversity.

Chandra Pasma is a policy analyst with CPJ.



PHOTO: Mariel Angus/CPJ

Continuing dialogue: policy analyst Chandra Pasma talks with Nan Budding about CPJ's work at the Faith in Diversity event in Toronto in October (see page 2).



On the Hill: Maria van Geest, Trixie Ling and Chandra Pasma with MP Irene Mathysen (second from right). See page 4.

Freedom from poverty is a human right

by Karri Munn-Venn

The United Nations has declared 2008–2017 to be the Second Decade for the Eradication of Poverty.

Poverty is often understood as a question of income, or more broadly, of resources. There has, however, been an important shift towards a more complete understanding of poverty, one that reflects the centrality of human rights.

CPJ grounds its work in the belief that all people, created in God's image, are to live in dignity. This perspective provides the starting point for our work of envisioning Canada without poverty, and is reflected in international human rights mechanisms. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights preamble states that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace."

The predominant tendency to consider poverty an issue simply based on income fails to recognize the many other aspects of poverty: housing, healthcare, benefits, social supports, labour stability, family situation and structure, to name a few. It also fails to recognize that freedom from poverty is a human right, one that has long been reflected in key international human rights mechanisms.

Long-standing recognition

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1949, states that "Everyone has the *right* to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the *right* to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control" (emphasis added).

The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights echoes this statement, and elaborates that "The States Parties to the pres-

ent Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent." The covenant also recognizes everyone's right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

These rights are reaffirmed in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989.

Poverty violates human rights

Poverty is a condition that violates these human rights. Poverty impedes people's access to the basic resources necessary for well-being, including adequate and sufficient food and clothing, as well as safe and appropriate housing. Poverty is also an important social determinant of health.

The UN's *Draft Guidelines on A Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction* suggest that "Once this concept is

introduced into the context of policy-making, the rationale of poverty reduction no longer derives merely from the fact that the poor have needs but also from the fact that they have *rights* – entitlements that give rise to legal obligations on the part of others" (emphasis added).

The covenant recognizes everyone's right to an adequate standard of living, including food, shelter and clothing.

In 2006, the Human Rights Council (HRC) of the UN was mandated to "undertake a universal periodic review ... of the fulfillment by

each State of its human rights obligations and commitments."

This Universal Periodic Review formalized the UN's pre-existing monitoring function; it also provided a mechanism through which non-governmental organizations could comment on their government's compliance to human rights commitments.

Anticipating Canada's review in February 2009, CPJ made a submission to the HRC's Universal Periodic Review of Canada, "From Promise to Action: Implementing Canada's Commitments on Poverty."

Despite Canada's considerable affluence, one in 10 Canadians continue to live in poverty. Fulfilling Canada's obligations under the human rights instruments relevant to this review would significantly contribute to poverty reduction in our country.

In our brief, CPJ recommends that the federal government adopt a national poverty reduction strategy, including a long-term vision with timelines and targets, an action plan and a budget, accountability measures and poverty indicators. It should also encourage Canadian provinces and cities to follow this example.

Freedom from poverty is a human right.

The full text of CPJ's brief to the UPR is available on our website: www.cpj.ca.

Karri Munn-Venn is CPJ's socio-economic policy analyst.

PHOTO: Mariel Angus



Standing Up: Socio-economic policy analyst Karri Munn-Venn speaks at an anti-poverty event on Oct. 17, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Over 40 people gathered to show their support for government action on poverty reduction.

All I want for Christmas ...

By James C. Dekker

My kids and wife hardly give me stuff anymore, regardless of the occasion. Around Christmas, birthdays and Father's Day, they once paid close attention to the perpetual gross list I'd stick on the refrigerator: "Two of everything." (A Mennonite friend calls that my "Noah List" – but I *never* wanted even one cat.)

To make their searches for perfect gifts specific and sometimes affordable, I'd highlight certain must-haves: dog, sweatbands, squash balls, *dog*, laser-guided mitre saw, **dog**, 1962 Jaguar XKE, simple cabin on a private lake on the Canadian Shield, a book or ten, **DOG**.

How things change. It all started when, in a thoughtless burst of self-control, I cut my gross list in half. And people responded. Sure, I'd get sweatbands and squash balls, but someone suggested I didn't really need the mitre saw, because Joe Gottfred next door said I could borrow his.

I attribute part of the sea-change to conversations with my brother-in-law Cal during long bike rides. (On fairly high-end bikes; I'm not completely cured.) Both of us belonged to groups that regularly battled our own willy-nilly consumerism. Many discussions resulted in conscious group decisions: eat together, donate dollar amounts of "needless stuff" reduction to development or environmental organizations.

Once, Cal summed up our conversations: "Every time I read Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, it costs me 1500 bucks." My response: "Astonishingly, not only can we afford that – we hardly feel it if we're a little careful about buying needless stuff."

To put it bluntly, I wonder whom we're really hurting by how we live, even considering our small steps cutting personal consumption. For example, Rose and I still own two cars; public transportation will not get her to work or me to people in my congregation. She carools; I bike when possible. We always take half-measures in buying, in giving, in living.



Rose and James Dekker

Then there's the maddening complication that my coveted mitre-saw would pay workers in development, production, marketing, sales and transportation sectors – though in differing degrees. They need work, too.

But Romans 6:22-23 oddly helps: "Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God...For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Maybe it doesn't sound like an Advent text, but here's how it fits.

With decades-long help from books, friends and the Scriptures, I am realizing that thoughtless consumerism is daily paying us ever more mini-deaths. How long can God's world survive our consumerist acquisitiveness? Though we attend worship weekly and pray daily, we often seem to worship what we do and stuff we buy or make. Materialism – the quest for wealth and personal or national security – separates us from different cultures, nations and faiths. We are killing relationships personally, nationally and internationally. Was I killing Joe Gottfred just a little by coveting my own saw and not borrowing his?

In *Christianity Today Weekly*, Scot McKnight discusses what Emergent Church thinker Brian McLaren calls the "'suicide machine' that threatens the existence of the world – the prosperity system, the security system, and the equity system. Each has its own characteristic dysfunction: unhindered economic growth, unredeemptive violence, and the rich/poor conflict. They are part of the reigning secular framing story – one that Western Christians subconsciously believe."

Whom have I killed a little besides Joe Gottfred and myself by wanting even only one of everything? I'm guessing the list reaches from family members to people I don't know, living in places I've never been.

Advent Christians prepare personally and communally for Jesus' return.



Romans 6:23 gives us the bad news about the slavery of our ambient sin – buying or wanting things that end up killing people and God's world. Blessedly, though, the good news outweighs the bad: People who believe and live because Jesus gave himself no longer kill ourselves or others with stuff. We can live for Jesus, a bit like Jesus till he returns.

My recent Christmas lists have not been so gross: hand-knit socks from one daughter, pictures of grandchildren from other daughters, a book or two. (I got my dog four years ago.) Rose and I have given acres of rain forest, herds of goats, semi-trucks of guinea pigs to people all over on behalf of our mothers and children. We can still more than afford it. We hardly feel it. Should we?

I pray I've killed less of myself and others lately. Moreover, I've learned some of what Paul describes in Ephesians 4:7-8: "To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'"

Jesus' gift of himself reminds me of the debt he paid. It also urges me to give one significant gift to our children this Christmas: Margaret Atwood's 2008 Massey Lectures, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*. In the current debt and credit crisis, we're only reaping the deaths we've sown as a world. Turning all our stuff and selves over to Christ will reduce deaths till Jesus returns.

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**How long can
God's world
survive our
consumerist
acquisitiveness?**