

## **Public Justice, Then and Now and Into the Future (2)**

*A speech on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Citizens for Public Justice and the Public Justice Resource Centre, Edmonton, Saturday, May 29, 2004*

by Kathy Vandergrift, Director of Policy for World Vision Canada and PJRC board member

It's really great to be here this evening. Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) in Edmonton remains home for me because of the social space this community provided me to think about the link between faith and the bigger world, and then to do something about it.

It's particularly comforting for me to come back now, because my journeying this year has taken me to the conflict zone in northern Uganda – a place where injustice reigns without bounds – and then to Amsterdam, the birthplace of some of CPJ's core ideas. For those of you who don't know the situation in northern Uganda, there is a war there, where children are abducted and turned into child soldiers. It was a really gripping experience for me to be there and to see that level of injustice.

I also still enjoy reading stories about Edmonton now that I live in Ottawa. Whenever I read about these "can do" innovation stories out of Alberta I just want to come back to town, and I can tell you when the hockey game was played outside on real ice with Wayne Gretsky, well . . . ! Recently, though, we have a special interest in Klein's essay on Pinochet – I want to get a copy. *[See endnote for an explanation of this statement – ed.]*

40 years. It's a time of maturity, but not yet time for the middle age bulge. It's not yet 50, when tradition sets in. It is a time for celebration with reflection. I thought it might be helpful to lift up a few elements from the time I know best, with a lessons-learned approach. So we can look forward as well as look back. What have we learned from what we did here in Alberta. I selected a number of initiatives that illustrate, I think, the heart and the challenges for all of us who want to be agents of God's good news of justice and shalom for all.

### 1. Stewardship in Practice.

Does anyone here remember the launch of the blue box recycling program in Edmonton? CPJ and the Mennonite Central Committee formed the Edmonton Recycling Society and then won a contract with the city to start collecting recyclables, in what was at the time the largest blue box program in Canada. We had two objectives in mind: reduce the waste, and create employment for groups who had a hard time finding work at that time in the city. It brought together the concept of stewardship and an economy of care.

What elements stand out that we can still learn from? It was a real-life model of stewardship and social care. It was timely – it responded to a need: you remember, Edmonton's garbage dump was filling up. Other cities followed suit, and it is now pretty common across the country.

That model had a number of strategic alliances. The Mennonites and CPJ complimented each other. The role of faith communities, as I look back, was essential to building the public support we needed. I remember going around to all these churches, with brochures in one hand and a blue box in the other, talking about the importance of what we were about.

We also worked with governing bodies – justice is not always about confrontation.

It was a catalyst to change the way we think about garbage. One radio interviewer questioned me about employing people with mental challenges to sort garbage. The answer was: they see it as resources, so should we.

A lot has changed in the business of waste reduction, but the principles CPJ established remain. CPJ should celebrate its role in that movement.

## 2. Economic Justice

One year CPJ pioneered the concept of an Alternative Budget to show concretely that choices could be made to do justice for those in need, and to have a healthy economy. It addressed head-on the argument that we cannot afford to do justice. Investing in housing and full employment makes economic sense. It was a good initiative, ahead of its time, but a tough sell in Alberta. CPJ continued to advance core ideas. Now other organizations do alternative budgets every year.

Budgets have become a centerpiece of public policy, perhaps too much so. They have become political statements without economic reality. Not one budget across the country in last year has been close to reality, leading one columnist to suggest establishing an independent budget office. It seems we can't trust our governments to add numbers correctly.

## 3. Canada's Federal Structure

As I reflect on CPJ's work over 40 years, it seems one of the bigger challenges is simply to make notions of social justice work within the federal structure of Canada. In moving from Edmonton to Ottawa's Parliament Hill during the 1990s, I have seen too many reasonable approaches to social policy run aground on the shoals of federal-provincial relations.

Jane Stewart deserves more credit than she ever got for getting the maternity benefits extended up to one year. She had no help from those groups that run large ads in support of family.

## 4. Geography and Diversity

Within the CPJ community, I wonder if the power of Canada's geography and the challenge of governing this large and diverse country received enough attention in the early days as we developed ideas that were rooted in the very different context of the Netherlands.

Now that I work on international justice issues, I am conscious both of how thankful and of how vigilant we must be. Many countries are torn apart by war over differences less than those that divide Alberta and Quebec.

Diversity remains a strength and a challenge for Canada. Whatever the outcome of the election, we are likely to have another pizza parliament, with heightened regional tensions.

One proposed solution is a concept advanced years ago by CPJ and now taken up by others – proportional representation. Four provinces are moving in that direction and NDP leader Jack Layton is making it one of his qualifications for supporting the Liberals, if we end up with a minority Liberal government. If we come out of the election with a coalition government made up of the Conservatives and the Bloc Quebecois, which is a possibility, then we will see a radical shift in favour of provincial power. I doubt justice will be better served.

Who better than a public-justice minded group in Alberta to help us find a new way to govern with respect for diversity, while doing justice for all within our geographic as well as religious and cultural pluralisms?

Canada is a model for many countries in its struggle to maintain peace among diverse peoples. How well we meet that challenge could be a major contribution to global search for peace with justice.

#### 5. Contentious Issues

It is easy, on occasions of celebration, to ignore the rough spots. But when you're 40 you have to be realistic. During the time I was active in CPJ Alberta, the role of women, abortion, and later same-sex relationships strained the community that supported CPJ.

#### 6. Human Rights

Since then I have focussed more attention on the rights of children and come up against similar strains in the Christian community, in Canada and elsewhere. Why do we get stuck on issues of human rights? What is the way out?

Rights and responsibilities are at the heart of Biblical teachings about justice. Many see "rights-talk" as a threat or as a secular, individualistic replacement for faith. I note that CPJ's work on child poverty, however, is not really rooted in a rights-based approach.

I am becoming convinced that Christians have something important to contribute to the growing field of human rights. But we haven't developed our understanding of the relationship between human rights and responsibilities. Rather than retreating from rights-based approaches, or attacking them, I suggest that we bring to the discussion table approaches that reflect Biblical teachings about dignity and the calling of every person.

Christians can bring to human rights an emphasis on human dignity, in contrast to approaches based on individual self-fulfillment. On the responsibility side, for rights and

responsibilities are two sides of same coin, we can offer approaches based on the covenant, rather than on contracts.

Why is this important?

Behind a façade of positive rhetoric about human rights, Canada is actually slipping in genuine respect for human rights.

Here are three examples:

- i. Our anti-terrorism laws have led to a serious erosion of human rights in the name of security. These laws are neither necessary nor effective. In fact, they are counter-productive if we really want to root out terrorism and the reasons people resort to terrorist acts. Christian people have been asleep because the primary targets have not been Christians. For example, the government told Monia Mazigh – the wife of Maher Arar – to be silent. Her church told her to be silent. When she was asked why she persisted, her eloquent answer was that she did not want her children to grow up in a world where people were silent in the face of human rights abuses.
- ii. Canada has just adopted a National Action Plan for Children that should and could have been a vehicle to advance the rights of children in this country. On the first page, Canada brags about supporting the Convention on the Rights of the Child. But then it rejects a rights-based approach in favour of old-style child-welfare language that sees children as objects of charity, not as people with dignity, not as subjects with rights and responsibilities in keeping with their ages and in relationship to families, communities and governments.
- iii. Canada is developing a new international policy, but human rights is a much lower priority than either security and trade. I could cite examples.

If we don't frame our commitments in terms of rights and responsibilities, then it is easier to make all kinds of trade-offs. We live in a world where trade agreements are binding contractual obligations and military/political power is concentrated in the hands of a few. The only balancing force that puts people at the centre is a human rights system. It is a toothless system – it needs to be stronger. It needs active support from groups like CPJ.

## 7. Citizenship in Practice

Anyone remember this? (holding up booklet of resolutions from CPJ Alberta meeting) On a similar occasion in 1987, the evening CPJ banquet in Edmonton was preceded by a day in which members deliberated over issues and positions in a variety of areas.

While resolutions themselves are not earth-shattering in their consequences, what was going on during the debate around their formulation is essential for a healthy democracy in Canada. That was a deliberate exercise of citizenship in Alberta, through the vehicle of CPJ. The resolutions represented the work of numerous working groups, including many younger people, and the outcomes were taken to decision-makers.

The form may change, but the exercise of active citizenship, beyond the ballot box and beyond being a taxpayer, is essential. I think Canadians are waking up to an awareness that

our democracy is in trouble and can't be taken for granted. This emerging concern also presents an opportunity for CPJ.

My current work includes working on global citizen-based campaigns. This type of activity is much easier in the age of electronic communications than it was in 1987. The potential to use communications technology like the internet for justice may be one of few redeeming features of globalization.

What better way to celebrate turning 40 than to strengthen some CPJ muscles that may be getting a bit flabby, while using the maturity that comes from 40 years of life lessons, to make a difference where it really counts in the country we love. Canada is still a place where we can contribute to the development of a public space that respects creation and the dignity of every person, a public space that creates room for everyone to contribute to sustainable development through the mutual exercise of our rights and responsibilities in service to the God who gave them to us.

*Endnote – Kathy's reference was to a statement by Premier Ralph Klein to the Alberta legislature May 2004 during a discussion about public auto insurance: "It sounds like (former president Salvador) Allende in Chile, you know, when he took over all the copper mines and said the Americans are out, the government now owns all the copper mines, all the minerals, all the resources, all the mining . . . Pinochet came in, Mr. Speaker, and I'm not saying that Pinochet was any better, but because of the only elected communist in Chile, Allende, and the socialist reforms he put in, Pinochet was forced, I would say, to mount a coup."*

## Kathy Vandergrift

Kathy, currently Director of Policy for World Vision Canada, developed her roots in Canadian advocacy with CPJ when she served as a board member and as the Alberta staff person.

Always in search of effective ways to work for greater justice, Kathy has worked in both government and NGO offices. She served as the Chief of Staff for former Edmonton Mayor Jan Reimer and as a policy analyst on Western Canadian issues within the federal government.

Now focused on international issues, Kathy co-chairs an international advocacy group on Children and Armed Conflict, which brings her to UN Security Council debates, and she chairs a Canadian NGO coalition on Sudan which challenged Talisman Energy on its role in Sudan.



### **Public Justice Resource Centre**

[www.publicjustice.ca](http://www.publicjustice.ca)  [info@publicjustice.ca](mailto:info@publicjustice.ca)

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**

[www.cpj.ca](http://www.cpj.ca)  [cpj@cpj.ca](mailto:cpj@cpj.ca)

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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