

Public Justice, Then and Now and Into the Future (1)

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

by Jim Visser, artist, retired farmer, advocate and activist

Can you picture in your mind the early 1960s? The Kennedy years? The cold war at its zenith? A kid from Minnesota who came on singing "Blowin' In the Wind?"

John Diefenbaker was our Prime Minister, and our country was recovering from second-world-war and Korean-war traumas. It welcomed boatload after boatload of European immigrants.

The Dutch were prominent among the huge number of post-war immigrants to Canada. From 1947 through the '50s they came. They settled in cities and rural areas from coast to coast. Most of them chose Ontario, Alberta and B.C. Many were devout Christians from the Dutch Reformed churches who adopted the Christian Reformed Denomination of North America as their new church home in this new land.

I was an eight-year-old boy in 1947, when our family arrived in Alberta. My parents were active participants in establishing immigrant churches in Edmonton and promoting a culture rooted in Dutch Calvinism. They held a conviction that Christ is Lord and has a claim on all human endeavors. Life is religion, hence our schools should be Christian, as should any other group or society organized to give a value expression to the body politic. In the spheres of human endeavour this would certainly include labour unions and organizations for political action.

Hence, Christian schools were established wherever there were Reformed congregations. In the mid '50s a group of visionaries met in Toronto to form an association with the ambitious goal to some day establish a Christian university. This was also when the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) was organized and established its first bargaining units in Ontario.

It is in this flurry of passionate Christian resolve that we find the beginnings of CPJ. Here is how I remember it. The founders of the CLAC formed the Committee for Justice and Liberty because a separate voice was needed to appeal to the courts. Simultaneously in Alberta, the Christian Action Foundation (CAF) was formed to serve as a vehicle for Christian political expression. This was not just a Christian voice on political and cultural issues; it was intended to serve as a Christian presence in a pluralistic state. It certainly promoted the idea of alternative choices in a pluralist setting.

Prior to 1960 there already existed a small group of workers who met regularly under the name Christian Labour Association of Western Canada and who published a newsletter called

“The Western News.” With the advent of the national CLAC, they agreed to dissolve and become part of the CAF, and their publication, “The Western News” morphed into CAF’s publication “The Christian Vanguard.”

The three principle founders of the CAF were Louis Tamminga, the pastor of one of Edmonton’s immigrant Christian Reformed Churches, Andrew Wierenga, a young lawyer, and John Olthuis, a law student at the University of Alberta. Louis Tamminga also edited the Christian Vanguard. I came on board a year later. I think I was 23.

CAF’s purpose was to function in the political arena as a body of Christians addressing matters of the state. What cheek! We did have a conviction that gave us the courage to jump into the fray. We did have a sense of how society should function. Hence we were not afraid to wade into the uncharted waters of Alberta’s political scene. I am reminded of the apostle Paul’s admonition to the new Christians in Corinth to be fools for Christ.

In that era our confidence and insight were nurtured by participation in an active Christian Students club that met regularly on the University of Alberta campus to examine the roots of secularism and to ask how we might walk the walk of faith amid the social structures in which we functioned.

We organized and participated in conferences sponsored by “the movement,” which led to the establishment of the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS). We also followed the fight in the Ontario courts that led to the McRuer decision in 1963, and legitimized the CLAC as a rightful alternate bargaining agent.

We felt empowered. Our idealism was fed by the rapid growth of these developments and we were spurred on by leadership from respected theologians and educators. We felt that to follow Christ we needed to launch the beginnings of a Christian engagement in public life in Canada.

So what did this fledgling CAF do?

- a) It published the “Christian Vanguard” – 10 issues per year, with free copies mailed to all MLAs and others of influence.
- b) It conducted city-wide all-candidates forums during election campaigns.
- c) It sponsored a high-school students club as a discussion forum for Christian social action.
- d) It organized rallies featuring inspirational speakers.
- e) It addressed the issue of pluralism in education and after we had lobbied MLAs from the Social Credit government over a number of years (mostly back benchers as Premier Manning was not interested in 1966), John Fleming from Calgary forwarded a private members bill to provide per-pupil grants to Alberta’s independent schools. This resulted in \$100 annual per-pupil grants to Alberta’s Independent Schools. It also enhanced CAF’s status.

Tragically, we lost a fine leader in 1963, when Andrew Wierenga died in a car accident along with his wife Carolyn and his sister Gladys. In 1964, Louis Tamminga accepted a call to a church in Iowa, where he began what is now The Center for Public Justice, the Washington, DC, based sister organization to CPJ. In 1967 John Olthuis moved to Toronto to become the executive director of the ICS.

We in Edmonton soldiered on, as people like Bill Sinnema, Chris Gort, Jim Tuininga, my brother Bill and I kept the CAF going. Peter Nicolai edited Vanguard for one year, then left to study for the ministry. I took it over for about three years and from time to time took breaks from the farm to go on speaking/promotional tours in Ontario and British Columbia. This helped keep the membership base alive and broadened both the scope of, and support for, Vanguard.

Since we wanted Vanguard to expand into a broad-spectrum commentary journal we moved its publishing base to Toronto. Robert Carvill was a brilliant young American who connected to "the movement" by way of the prophetic Pete Steen of the Pittsburgh Coalition. He moved to Toronto and the ICS, and became Vanguard's new editor.

Outside of publishing the Vanguard, there was now very little CAF activity in Alberta, and we focused on a move to go national. The Committee for Justice and Liberty (CJL) functioned as the legal wing of the CLAC and Gerald Vandezande oversaw its role in pleading against the injustices encountered in Ontario. John Olthuis agreed to leave the ICS to become CJL's policy director. So the CAF merged with the support base of the Committee. The CJL Foundation was launched and established in the same building as the ICS.

It was 1973, and with John's systematic, analytical mind and Gerald's political insight and ecumenical connections, the board chose to address Canada's stewardship challenges. It identified Canada's energy resources as a focus, with reference to rapid resource depletion, aboriginal land claims, and our nation's "religious" commitment to an ever expanding Gross National Product as the only route to social progress.

I should share with you that there was division at our early board meetings about taking this direction. Some said we were not ready. Some were fearful of applying Christian political theory in the real world. This early division, unfortunately, led to a rift between CJL and the CLAC.

At this time Bob Carvill died of leukemia. Bonnie Green, a gifted writer and editor, challenged us to engage with society, but the more conservative spirit prevailed, leading to the demise of Vanguard. That was a very sad day for me, considering the years of time and energy invested in promoting this voice.

But CJL, now known as Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ), flourished. It chose to immerse itself in the Arctic Gas issue that Canada was wrestling with at the time. The question before the nation was whether the seven trans-national oil companies should be permitted to construct a huge pipeline from Canada's Arctic down the MacKenzie River Valley and on to hungry U.S. markets. CPJ decided to take on this question, and challenge our society's

addictive reliance on fossil fuels, and our apparent unconcern about destroying Aboriginal cultures and fragile environments to satisfy our appetite for oil.

By doing so, CPJ proved its naysayers wrong – those who said we weren't ready to enter the fray. When little CPJ dove into the major national discussion of the day it discovered a pressing need among our major churches and some national secular organizations, who wanted to address these same issues but lacked a vehicle to do so.

On behalf of CPJ, John Olthuis obtained intervenor status at the National Energy Board Hearings to consider the Arctic Gas proposal. He brought in bishops, pastors and priests as expert witnesses. Never before did Canada's churches have such a secular venue to preach the need for God's redemptive power in the issues before our nation.

At the same time, CPJ also took on the role of principal organizer for a 1976 Edmonton conference designed to engage the public in these matters. This conference brought together 500 participants from many churches, labour and social action groups, and Aboriginal communities and organizations – as well as Thomas Berger and the Minister of Indian Affairs. For three days, all these people discussed the value of a moratorium, to give Canada time to seek alternatives in favour of just land claims and a stewardship ethic for our resources and our fragile north.

Much more could be shared about the Berger Inquiry, and subsequent contracts with the Dené and Grassy Narrows to negotiate land claims. But suffice it to say that in the end the moratorium was adopted, and as the pipeline concept is now being revived, nearly a quarter of a century later, the political context is quite different, with Aboriginal stakeholders in a much stronger partnership position to help ensure any pipeline will be an environmentally and socially sound project. And CPJ has been one of the actors whose ongoing education and lobbying in support of Aboriginal voices has helped bring about that changed political context.

Let us be thankful to God for using CPJ in this fashion in these initial years. It jumped in without flinching. And as we move on from our past reflections, let us celebrate the blessings of the journey. I dare say that CPJ has been humble in its walk and that it has made its choices in response to our Lord's big question: "Have you fed the hungry, given shelter to the homeless, spoken for the disadvantaged?" Yes, and I believe that we can go into the future expecting to continue to be a balm for Canada.

Jim Visser

Jim is an artist, primarily a landscape painter. Prior to this he was a seed potato producer.

As a member of TOPSOIL and the Legacy Lands Conservation Society, Jim is involved in addressing urban sprawl and agricultural land conflicts in the greater Edmonton area and in the Province of Alberta.

Jim served on the first Board of the Christian Action Foundation (CAF) and during the 1960s he focussed on promoting *The Christian Vanguard*, editing it for a few years before the transfer to Toronto. When the Committee for Justice and Liberty merged with the CAF, Jim served on the Board for several terms.



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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