

## **Public Justice, Then and Now and Into the Future (3)**

*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 Jan Wesselius, philosopher and vice-chair of the board of CPJ

First let me say how grateful I am to those of you who founded Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) and who have supported it over the last 40 years. CPJ has been enormously influential as I've struggled with what it means to be a Christian citizen.

It seems to me that one of the most important things about CPJ both in the past and in its future is that it shows a commitment to respond to God's call for justice for everyone. This is what it means for us to be a responsible citizen: to take responsibility for working for the common good of all, and not just the common good of our particular community.

I'm not a policy analyst nor a political scientist, so my remarks are going to be less about specifics and more to do with overall themes, with a broader picture of trying to be a Christian citizen in a diverse society.

So let me trace connections between two trends that have been observed in Canadian society in the last 40 years.

In Canadian society, the public role for religion has steadily decreased. In other words, religion has become increasingly privatized. Religious commitments and values are fine for private individuals to have. But they must keep them out of the public sphere.

The second trend is the decline of the notion of citizenship. Instead of being citizens, we are consumers who want to get their money's worth out of governments.

These two trends together can, I think, explain in part what we hear about so often: the lack of enthusiasm for politics among the younger generation.

But religious commitments can't really be privatized. When we don't see them overtly in the public sphere, they have just gone underground. The people who founded and support CPJ know that. CPJ is swimming against the current as we insist that faith-based political advocacy and analyses are both legitimate and contribute to the common good. But this swimming upstream is worthwhile. It is worthwhile because it can be very fruitful for our fellow citizens to realise why religious commitments of any sort can't truly be privatized. Let me explain.

All human beings put their trust in something. All human beings have faith commitments. And when we're talking about our deepest commitments, they're religious commitments, whether or not they include theism or membership in an institutional worship community.

Christians or other theists aren't unique in having faith commitments.

Not only are these foundational commitments quintessentially human, but it is from these commitments that our vision of the common good arises. I'm talking now about worldview. Also, it is these deepest commitments that feed our motivations to do things in the public sphere. They give us energy, they give us a reason for doing things, they make our political actions meaningful.

This is why it has been a huge mistake to say, as many liberal democracies say, that religion – any ultimate commitment and value – can't play a role in the private sphere. In fact, as the analysis of CPJ points out, it doesn't really work.

Another part of the faith tradition out of which CPJ was born says that God's world is a coherent, integral whole; and we humans, as part of this creation, are too. What does that mean, especially in politics? How does that show up in CPJ's work?

Well, it brings me back to the replacement of our identity as citizens with an identity as consumers. See, the identity as consumers of government services is impoverished – we are so much more. The consumer identity doesn't take into account our relations with each other in communities and in Canadian society as a whole.

Another implication of the belief that God created a coherent and integral world is that the issues that arise in the public sphere are related. Most times we can't deal with one political issue without paying attention to how it's related to a whole bunch of other political issues. Let me give you a very brief example.

There's a real focus on issues of security right now. But we can't talk about security without addressing some of the underlying reasons why some groups of people have so little security that they turn to terrorism, which ultimately threatens the security of everyone. So to talk about issues of security, we need to talk about refugee issues, poverty, environmental degradation, access to environmental resources, religious freedom and tolerance, the condition of indigenous peoples.

If you are to deal with the complex interrelations between these issues – the reality that they are multi-dimensional and multi-relational – without getting bogged down or paralyzed, you need an integrated worldview from which to understand them. Because CPJ knows that God's creation is integrally interrelated, because CPJ has a coherent worldview, because CPJ is conscious of and up-front about its worldview, CPJ has made a contribution, and can continue to make a contribution, to Canadian society that is out of proportion to its size as a small organization.

So, one of the challenges for public justice in the future is to offer alternatives to these trends, as we've done for the past 40 years. Our staff has the task of identifying the specific issues that need work. For the rest of us, the task is to make time for regular reflection and action.

Let me give one brief example of what responsible citizenship might look like. It might include making the time to participate locally in regular roundtable discussions on local issues – in fact, many of you, I’m sure, remember doing this in local CPJ groups in years past. It might mean committing the time and energy to set something like this up.

Now have I said enough about public justice in the future? Not really, since in part, this is something for us as a community to decide. But the two things that I’ve talked about – the fact that human beings have ultimate commitments and the integral nature of reality, including the integral nature of us humans – are aspects of the underlying worldview of CPJ and they make CPJ fairly unique as a political advocacy and research organization.

Too often, we’re faced with choosing between two extreme views of public justice – either privatize our own deepest commitments **or** try to impose our particular commitments and values on all of society. I don’t think these choices let us be responsible to God’s call for justice. God makes very clear that there must be justice for all and not just for those who agree with us.

So what can and should we do? We should each offer our own traditions and community as a resource for the common good of all. We members of CPJ can offer the insights of our own religious tradition – which views the nature of reality as coherent and integrated – in the service of the common good.

Even more specifically, in our own faith communities, we can model relations of mutual responsibility that are respectful of the diversity within these communities. CPJ has always said that public justice means justice for everyone. This is something that we have to remember: that Christ is for the world and so we must also be for the world.

## Janet Wesselius


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She has extensive volunteer experience which includes serving as a board member of a housing cooperative in Toronto, being involved with the Jubilee 2000 campaign in both Toronto and Edmonton, and currently as a member of the Ecological Justice Program Committee for KAIROS.

Jan has been a board member of CPJ for Alberta North/Northwest Territories since 2002 and now also serves as vice-chair.




### **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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