

The Next 40 Years

A speech on the 40th Anniversary of Citizens for Public Justice and the Public Justice Resource Centre, Toronto, Friday, September 12, 2003

by Carol Goar, editorial page columnist, The Toronto Star

I can't tell you what an honour it is to have been invited to speak at your 40th anniversary celebration.

Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) has been working to right fundamental wrongs for much longer than I have. I salute the courage of your founders and thank all of you for continuing their mission. I hope I can contribute to your quest for a stronger, fairer society in some small way this evening.

Canada has come a long way since 1963. We were a nation of 18 million then. There are more than 31 million of us now. The value of all the goods and services we collectively produced was \$42 billion then. It's close to \$1 trillion now.

Socially, we've made major gains too. Medicare was still a work in progress 40 years ago. The death penalty had just been abolished. The last segregated Negro school in Nova Scotia had just been closed. The Canada Pension Plan was still working its way through the House of Commons.

And yet, I'm not sure your founders would like the Canada they see today.

They took for granted that hunger and homelessness had no place in a rich, developed nation. They understood that an equitable distribution of wealth was the mark of a healthy society. They were part of a brave and hopeful debate about the kind of country this could be.

Let me take you back to the Edmonton campus of the University of Alberta, four decades ago. One of the journalists whom I admire most, the late Blair Fraser, was giving a speech. He said: "It is within our capacity to experiment in ways that might be impossible for nations that face problems on a larger scale, or whose financial resources to cope with them are less adequate than ours."

He challenged his audience to make Canada a test tube for solving two of the most daunting problems facing humankind.

He believed that his fellow Canadians had a better chance than almost any people in the world of showing that a nation split along cultural and linguistic lines could not only work, but thrive. And he thought Canada had the capacity to end the isolation and impoverishment of its Aboriginal minority.

I think we could safely say that Blair Fraser's first experiment has been a success. In ways that he couldn't even have anticipated, we have learned to make diversity a source of strength.

I suspect he was thinking primarily about French-English relations when he delivered his speech. Those were the two solitudes that bedeviled his generation. It would be premature to say that we've figured out for all time how to accommodate our two founding cultures within one political entity. But we have learned to live together respectfully.

More than that, we've become a society that is extraordinarily open to other cultures. We have allowed the face and texture of Canada – at least urban Canada – to change in ways that really do make this country a model for the world.

I concede that we're not as good as we need to be at integrating newcomers into the economic mainstream. Nor are we as free from prejudice and racial stereotyping as we like to pretend. But on balance, we have shown that a bilingual, multicultural nation can work.

I don't think any of us would say that Canada has succeeded in meeting Blair Fraser's second challenge.

We have failed dismally to address the needs of our First Nations. Conditions on many Canadian reserves rival the deprivation of the Third World. The suicide rate for Aboriginal young people is staggeringly high. Land claims that date back generations remain unresolved. Our federal government persists in imposing Ottawa-style solutions on Canada's original inhabitants, rather than working with them to translate their aspirations into reality.

Despite isolated success stories, the plight of our Aboriginal people is a blot on Canada's human rights record and an embarrassment to every citizen who believes in public justice. I know your organization has been fighting for Aboriginal rights for many years. Please keep fighting. This battle is a test of our values and our ability to live up to them.

As I was reading Blair Fraser's speech, I found myself asking what challenges I would identify, if someone gave me the opportunity to talk about Canada as a test tube for positive change in 2003. You have given me that opportunity. And, like him, I'm going to pick two.

The first may sound ambitious and out of step with the prevailing political ethos. But I'd like to see Canada prove that it's possible for an industrial nation in the 21st century to narrow the gap between rich and poor.

We have the resources to support a decent standard of living for all of our people. We're not as economically polarized as some western countries, notably the United States. And despite the dismantling of many of our safety nets, we still have a residual belief in social equity.

The problem is, we're on the wrong trajectory. Tax cuts, especially those aimed at homeowners and affluent investors, help the very people who don't need more wealth. The discipline of the marketplace, which so many of our political leaders extol, rewards the privileged and punishes the poor. And the off-loading of government responsibilities on to individuals, charities and the private sector often leaves the disadvantaged to fend for themselves.

To make matters worse, we have a government here in Ontario that denigrates social assistance recipients, pushes single parents without child care into minimum-wage jobs and dismisses subsidized housing as a boondoggle.

But we are heading into elections at the provincial, municipal and federal levels in the coming months. There are candidates who have spoken out against regressive tax cuts, who understand the importance of affordable housing and child care, and who believe in sharing the risks and benefits of citizenship.

If ever there was a time when progressive voices mattered, it is now.

Paul Martin, who is poised to become our next prime minister, needs to know that there are a significant number of Canadians who remember that he called a strong, expanding middle class "the backbone of a healthy country" five years ago. He needs to be reminded that there are many citizens who share the conviction he expressed 13 years ago that "housing is a fundamental human right." And he needs to hear that Canadians expect him to act on his stated belief that every child deserves the chance to succeed.

Ontario's three provincial party leaders need to hear that voters are tired of being bribed with tax cuts; ashamed of seeing homeless people on their streets, and offended by suggestions that those who need help are cheats, parasites or bad parents.

I'm using strong language because I think many of us – and let me be the first to admit guilt – have spoken too softly in recent years.

For a long time, I refused to use the phrase child poverty. To me, it implied that only the young and blameless deserved society's compassion. Adults who had fallen on hard times could be overlooked. I still find the phrase disturbing, but I have used it in print.

Conversely, it took me a long time to use the word "greed" to describe the behaviour that our former premier, Mike Harris, legitimized so effectively. I knew what I was seeing, but I dared not put a name on it. Finally I got angry enough to break that taboo.

I understand that it is sometimes necessary – maybe even smart – to cajole rather than alienate right-wing governments. But I think it's time to aim higher than damage control.

We have the tools to reverse the polarization of wealth. Canada still has a progressive tax system. We have a national child benefit plan that could be built into an income support

system for struggling families. We have a network of good (though under-funded) public schools and universities. We have a tentative national housing strategy and a patchwork of child care centres. That's enough to get started.

It's not impossible to make a society more equitable. Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau did it, with the support of groups like yours. Why not now?

A second proposition I would put to you is that Canada has the potential to show what good global citizenship looks like in the 21st century.

Historically, we have played a constructive role on the international stage. We are respected, or least regarded with benign interest, in most of the world. And we are close enough to the United States that our innovations will be noticed, if not always welcomed, in Washington.

But once again, we'd have to change course. Our foreign aid spending ranks an embarrassing 16th out of the world's 22 major donor countries. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has become so inward-looking and bureaucratic that most taxpayers have no idea where their foreign aid dollars go and little incentive to care. And we've been too busy reaping the material benefits of globalization to count the human cost.

Still, Canada is well placed to take a more enlightened approach. We are an outward looking people. Our churches and civil society groups have never stopped fighting for policies that put people before markets. And as Ottawa showed in the campaign for a treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines, we do have the capacity to exercise moral leadership and work with non-government groups around the world for peace.

What we need to do is knit these isolated efforts into a consistent and proudly Canadian pattern of global engagement.

Why couldn't our generic drug industry, for instance, take the lead in getting affordable medicines to people with HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other life-threatening diseases in the Third World? And why couldn't Ottawa subsidize the distribution of these medicines to people who can't afford even cut-rate drugs? The World Trade Organization might not like one country getting out ahead of the pack. The multinational pharmaceutical giants certainly wouldn't. But isn't saving millions of lives worth testing the rules of global trade?

Let me give you another suggestion. Why couldn't Canada be the first developed nation to compensate Third World countries for the loss of highly-trained professionals who immigrate here? There is no question that we need more doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers and scientists. But taking them from countries who have so little, without giving anything back, seems profoundly unfair to me. Think of the difference we could make if we offered to train 10 young professionals from developing nations for every one we took. Think of the debate we could engender if we urged other western nations to do likewise.

And why couldn't we require that any Canadian firm doing business in the developing world meet the same environmental standards as they do here? Responsible companies already follow this practice. It's not fair that they should be undercut by exploitative competitors. It's not right that Canada should be a global polluter. We have a chance to show that globalization doesn't have to mean double standards and ecological destruction. Who better than us to lead by example?

And when better than now? As the Chrétien era ends, we have a chance to re-think Canada's international role. We can remain a respectable, but fading, middle power. Or we can take a few risks to become a global problem solver.

Paul Martin's record on foreign affairs is mixed. As finance minister, he slashed foreign aid to its lowest level, as a proportion of GDP, in three decades. On the other hand, he was instrumental in the creation of the G-20, which brings together industrial countries and developing nations to discuss ways to spread the benefits of globalization more equitably. As he sets his priorities, he needs to hear from citizens who think Canada is too privileged to pinch pennies and has too much potential to be passive.

There are many issues, which I know you care about, that I haven't mentioned. The list includes everything from health care to the rebuilding of Iraq. I'd be happy to take questions. Or if you prefer, please feel free to speak to me privately after this evening's program.

Let me conclude by expressing my gratitude. It's not often that a journalist gets a chance to reflect on what could be, rather than what is. There aren't many audiences who start from the premise that public justice is the only sound basis on which to build a nation, a political platform or a society. You've made my job very easy.

Congratulations on 40 remarkable years. May there be many more.

Thank you very much.

Carol Goar

Carol Goar is one of those lucky people who knew what she wanted to do at the age of 10. She has been a journalist for 29 years and still thinks it was the right choice. She was born in Hamilton, grew up in Galt (now renamed Cambridge) and studied journalism at Carleton University.



She began her career as a reporter at the Ottawa Citizen and worked for the Canadian Press, FP New Service, and Maclean's Magazine before joining the Toronto Star in 1985. She has been the newspaper's national affairs columnist in Ottawa, bureau chief in Washington, and editorial page editor here in Toronto. She now writes a column on the editorial page three times a week.

She considers herself lucky to work at a newspaper that was founded to promote social justice, strive for an equitable distribution of wealth, and speak out for the disadvantaged. Those principles are as relevant now as they were a century ago. Carol considers it a privilege to defend them.



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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