

Viewpoint

Agenda for a Changing Society

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There is a deep disquiet in Canada. Cynicism is widespread, as is pessimism about the ability of this country to meet the needs of the individuals and groups that compose it. People are angry that opportunities are denied or unfulfilled unfairly; entitlements are not honoured. All our citizens do not participate fully in creating our society.

We must respond as a society to these concerns with the same urgency and at the same time as we re-examine our constitution, the rights of aboriginal peoples, and Canada's place in the global community. Otherwise these other exercises will be futile.

These paragraphs represent part of the consensus of an intensive workshop held in late 1990 by the Institute for Research on Public Policy under the general title "private support for public goods". Participants in the workshop represented the private, public and non-governmental sectors. They agreed that both public and private agendas must recognize and reflect the needs of our changing society.

The workshop recognized large gaps in how much we know about what is actually needed to make our society work best. Before the Spicer Commission was established, participants had called for a citizens' forum to increase our knowledge of these issues, debate them, and raise their profile among members of the public. That part of the discussion is omitted here.

This article will, however, provide a brief summary of the principal areas of agreement in the hope that the third sector can profit from the workshop's consensus and, perhaps, offer leadership in the discussions now taking place among all sectors about the social challenges Canada faces.

Encouraging New Values

We need new forms of governance and decision making and a new fairness in the distribution of resources. We must emphasize the renewal of our community through participation in civic life, and, in fact, a new social contract. No renewal can succeed without new values of change and community. To achieve these goals:

- the educational system must encourage lifelong learning;

- political leaders must promote cross-cultural understanding and increase the opportunities for cross-cultural contact;
- more resources must be directed to understanding why our society produces an “underclass” of seriously disadvantaged people and to ending this. The existence of such an “underclass” affects and reflects on all of us;
- Canadians must embrace innovation and experiment with new ideas while recognizing that success is not guaranteed; people must be allowed to say “I don’t know” or to make “mistakes” without severe repercussions.

Improving Organization and Communication

New values are of little use if they are not shared and put into action. Networking organizations should be nurtured to increase collaboration among sectors, within organizations, and across cultures. For example:

- All staff and boards of organizations should reflect cultural and linguistic diversity. Policies and programs that support this diversity should be encouraged.
- Partnership between the public and private sectors should be promoted. Successes should be publicized. Better measures of success should be developed and announced.
- Leaders should be trained to foster community processes that will develop local policies and priorities and implement them. Responsibility should devolve on local leaders. More broadly based organizations may need to engage special staff or offer special training to meet this need.

Increasing Corporate Commitment

The corporate sector will have to assume more responsibility for financing and delivering public goods in co-operation with non-government organizations and with governments. Corporations should:

- develop clear guidelines and programs for corporate giving;
- twin with selected nongovernmental organizations to promote specific activities on a sustained basis;
- encourage employee donations and matching grants;
- encourage volunteer activity within the organization and in the community;
- support experimental programs aimed at addressing the roots of problems, not just palliative efforts.

Tasks for Nongovernmental Organizations

NGOs have a critical role in delivering public goods in Canada. More than any other sector, NGOs are directly involved in the communities they seek to serve. They should therefore:

- encourage discussions aimed at reducing racism and social antagonism and towards achieving social goals and good citizenship while respecting diversity;
- use private-sector personnel to train their staffs—employees and volunteers—in marketing and operations, to help develop a partnership among the sectors, and to act, in some ways, as brokers between them.
- promote research on private support for public “goods”. This would include pressing Statistics Canada for more data on third-sector employment and the third sector’s activities and significance for Canada’s economy. This information should be disseminated to all voluntary organizations and to the public.
- make recipients aware of the costs of public services that are rendered “free”. It may alleviate cynicism and lack of trust if NOGs are the source of information on the scale and distribution of public “goods” financed by taxes. Governments are seen as self-promoting when they provide such information.

Broadening Public Discussion

Debate over private support for public “goods” can no longer be confined to the traditional participants—government, corporations, and NGOs. A broader public must be involved. For example:

- New methods of information exchange should be developed to allow people to participate in discussions and decisions on matters that affect them. New technologies may be used to increase participation in this way. This could in turn permit devolution of decision-making to the local level.
- The public should learn “media literacy”, i.e., how to understand and how to use the strengths and weaknesses of mass media of communication. Journalists should be encouraged to increase their understanding of the issues on which they report so that the media can play a more effective role in fostering debate on political and social issues.
- Educators and universities should have closer links with other areas of society to ensure broader discussion of advances in analysis or research. Nonpartisan intellectual leaders should be available to comment on current issues. Public forums should routinely be held to air questions of concern. “Think tanks” should be developed to research and discuss all of these topics.

While many of these points may seem broadly stated or vague, they indicate that a consensus and vision on the nature of the social contract can be developed across sectors. Further, they offer very useful criteria against which to measure the progress of the third sector and individual organizations. Are you getting closer to meeting these standards or to carrying out these programs? If not, are you really doing what is most useful for the society that you intend to benefit?