

Viewpoint

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The Role of Volunteers in Canadian Society*

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My subject is one that I believe receives too little attention in Canada—the role of volunteers in our society.

For more than 100 years, we Canadians, more than most other people in the world, have been volunteering our time and money to our communities. For one reason or another, we have banded together voluntarily to help each other to change our society, or simply to get things done. These acts of volunteering have been as simple and private as helping a neighbour in need or coaching the local hockey team. On other occasions, they have involved thousands—like the Terry Fox Marathon of Hope. And they have been as ambitious as joining tens of thousands of others to help elect a government at home or help stop a war abroad. Volunteers are found in almost every kind of activity in our land.

I believe the vast extent of volunteering in Canada has done far, far more to help shape our country than we recognize. It has had a great deal to do with preserving the health of our democracy. It has allowed us to be innovative in creating new, and reforming old, economic and social institutions. It has helped save our inner cities from decay and improved the quality of life for small-town and rural Canadians. In brief, it has helped make us a peaceful, caring and decent society.

In my view, we pay too little attention to this important and productive aspect of our national life and I want to make a very strong plea for more recognition and support for the voluntary sector.

I have to confess that I make this plea partly because I grew up in a family of volunteers who lived in a small prairie town in Alberta which was steeped in the tradition of volunteering. In our town we had 750 residents—and no fewer than 125 voluntary organizations. Thinking back to the 1940's and 1950's, it is hard to recall any aspect of community life in Nanton in which volunteers were not important.

Volunteers built the ball park, the arena, the swimming pool. All social and most church activities were organized by volunteers—as were all our social services. The fire department, the library, and the community centre were staffed by

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volunteers. Even the rural telephone companies were organized, and their phone lines constructed, by volunteers.

The main industries in the area—agriculture and agricultural marketing—were co-ordinated by volunteer networks of grain growers and ranchers. Volunteers also founded the local branches of the co-ops—volunteer organizations that are important to so many aspects of Canadian life, from grain handling to credit unions.

Growing up, I thought our town was unique. It was only later I discovered that voluntarism has been the rule on every frontier—New France in the 1600's, Western Ontario in the 1800's, the Prairies in the early 1900's, or the difficult urban social “frontier” of our major cities in the last couple of decades.

In fact, when de Tocqueville wrote about his historic tour of North America in 1835, he noted:

In no (place) in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in (North) America. Besides the permanent associations which are established by law . . . a vast number of others are formed and maintained by the agency of primary individuals . . . If a stoppage occurs in the thoroughfare . . . the neighbours immediately form themselves into a deliberate body . . . If some public pleasure is concerned, an association is formed to give more splendour and regularity to the entertainment . . . associations are established to promote public safety, commerce, industry, morality, and religion. There is no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united in a society.

I also found that with each wave of immigration to the larger cities of Canada, the groups that arrived banded together to help each other in volunteer associations. Many strong, healthy volunteer organizations operating today are evidence of that work—credit unions, settlement houses, educational centres, or the scores of senior citizens' homes that have been built in the last 25 years.

Even a cursory glance will demonstrate the massive role played by volunteers in:

- *Youth Athletic Programs*—an army of volunteers acts as coaches, administrators, and organizers;
- *Small Business*—volunteer consultants and others often simply pitch in to help a growing or struggling enterprise; (In New Brunswick I learned of a small sawmill and lumber company that was about to go out of business. One hundred people would have lost their jobs and a village could have died. An entrepreneur in the area heard of this situation, got together with a couple of friends, rearranged the company's finances, found a new manager and saved the company, the jobs and the village. None of those who helped owned shares or gained financially from their efforts.)
- *Our Armed Forces*—depend on volunteers in the militia, the Canadian Legion, regimental organizations and cadet corps;

- *Education*—a recent study shows that between 80 and 90 per cent of all elementary schools in Canada use volunteer assistance during and after school hours;
- *Social Service Agencies*—survive on the work of volunteers; (There are nearly 50,000 registered charities in Canada—and each could tell its own story of the contribution of volunteers.)
- *Social Reforms*—many have come about through the action or advocacy of volunteer groups; (Day-care facilities, rape crisis centres, senior citizens' services and programs, pension reform, programs and law reform for young offenders, and child welfare laws, to name just a few.)
- *Political Parties*—I can tell you from my own experience that 95 per cent of the political work in Canada is done by volunteers; (A major difference between our democratic political system and the oppressive systems of so many other countries is this massive voluntary political effort by citizens.)
- *Arts Facilities*—Roy Thompson Hall in Toronto is one evidence of what volunteer efforts can do in the fields of culture and the arts;
- *Religion*—all of our churches have a long and proud history of volunteer involvement in our communities and in the world beyond;
- *Hospitals*—depend upon a tremendous amount of work done by volunteers; (This work varies from membership on hospital boards to extensive programs for assisting patients.)
- *Unions*—in both the public and private sectors unionism has depended upon volunteer efforts for its growth, effectiveness and strength.

The Metro Toronto Social Planning Council gets rather statistical about how much volunteering there now is. They claim that half the adult population of Canada volunteers a total of 380 million hours each year. This is the equivalent of 250,000 full-time jobs worth \$3.5 billion.

You simply cannot think of a major field of endeavour that has not benefited from volunteerism. As the late Margaret Mead said:

We live in a society that has always depended upon volunteers of different kinds—some who can give money, others who can give time and a great many who give freely of their specific skills. If you look more closely you will see that almost anything that really matters to us—anything that really embodies our deepest commitment to the way that human life should be lived and cared for, depends on some form of voluntarism.

But while volunteering is widespread in Canada and considered by some to be important enough to receive government funding, it is, unfortunately, overlooked or discounted by others. One of the reasons for this is that we count our country's human activities improperly and fail to publicize all the results that we find when we do count.

As a result, particularly in this time of economic difficulty, we tend to focus almost entirely on a very few numbers: growth in Canada is "x" per cent higher or "y" per

cent lower, or the national wealth measured in income is “z” dollars per family. I do not argue that we should ignore such statistics. I do argue, however, that far more attention must be paid to other measurements.

In addition to calculating a Gross National Product, we ought to calculate a Gross Social Product—a measurement that shows social and cultural pluses and minuses as well as strictly economic ones. It seems to me:

- if we’ve created great art, dance, music or theatre in Canada, we ought to take that into consideration in our assessment of the state of the nation;
- if we have improved our physical fitness and produced better athletes, we should count this in our national records;
- if men and women are better educated than they used to be or have acquired more useful skills, shouldn’t this be noted as an increase in national wealth? (Some people value others only in terms of the salaries they command. I believe that volunteer work should be another yardstick by which we measure worth.)
- if senior citizens are healthier or less lonely, let’s add that to our total; but
- at the same time, we must *subtract* from our national balance sheet not only the lost economic productivity of unemployed Canadians, but the mental anguish, family hardships, and social poverty that are the result of layoffs and/or failure to find a job.

We have not moved fast enough to devise a way to show what all our activities (including those of volunteers) add up to. By relying exclusively on the bare data of traditional economic accounting, we produce a picture that is seriously distorted. Our incomplete accounts cause us to take, or fail to take, actions in government and in the private sector in ways that are sometimes counter-productive. I believe that we should give high priority to developing and publicizing a series of National Social Accounts that would provide a more accurate picture of Canada.

If we did so, perhaps we would have less reason for concern about those who are constantly attacking public institutions, government social programs, and social funding, and who argue specifically that it is not government’s proper role to assist private voluntary social and educational efforts. These critics would slash government programs and funding in favour of purely voluntary support.

Believe me, cutting public programs that support social, economic and cultural activities in the community will *not* give volunteers more scope. It will harm them by taking away the vital financial and institutional tools which make it possible for them to develop and sustain their voluntary programs.

One of the things that we have achieved in Canada (not perfectly by any means, but achieved nevertheless) is a system of public funding by all levels of government that helps underwrite voluntary educational, health, cultural and social services. In many cases government funding has been seed money that supported new or greater volunteer activity. In many, many other cases these funds provided start-up grants and operating assistance for volunteer organizations.

The critics on the right have urged, and in some countries have achieved, cutbacks in such government funding by arguing that voluntary donations of time and money will replace it. I believe that, on the contrary, if public funding for the social infrastructure is reduced, a great deal of voluntary work will, in fact, have to stop.

Let us look, for example, at some of the results of the recent reductions in government support for education in the United States. The federal money taken out of the U.S. school systems had paid for reading courses for disadvantaged children, teaching the handicapped, vocational education and school desegregation. The disappearance of these programs has been devastating for the poor, has ended the activities of thousands of volunteers and has put 55,000 American teachers out of work.

Voluntary action and government funding are not substitutes for each other. Rather, they reinforce each other—and together strengthen the community and improve the quality of life for our citizens. If we fail to preserve the public programs and funding upon which much of our voluntary action rests, we shall be a much poorer nation.

These are times of great uncertainty. We are undergoing fundamental changes in North America—in what we do for a living, and in the way we live. The western industrial democracies are experiencing serious economic dislocations and unemployment and Canada is caught up in these world problems and the search for new and better solutions.

We should, however, remember that this is not the first time Canadians have faced social, political and technological change. In 1890, for example, the population of Western Canada was less than 200,000. By 1920, 30 years later, 1.5 million people had moved onto the prairies, built towns, often learned a new language, started new careers, and together had built a new region. Western settlement was made possible by the national government but it was accomplished by the private sector and volunteers.

Following that period of change, we underwent, and adjusted to, even greater upheaval in the period from 1920 to 1950. In those 30 years, 40 per cent of all Canadians moved from farms to cities—from jobs in agriculture to jobs in manufacturing and service.

We should be encouraged to face today's problems when we remember how our society and its institutions were able to adapt to great change in the past. I believe that nothing was more critical to this process of adaptation than volunteer action. It will be equally critical to our success in meeting the challenges we face today.

Let us look at some areas in which volunteers are playing a crucial role in the process of change:

Housing — affordable housing is beyond the reach of many Canadians and unfortunately will remain so even when mortgage rates come down. Governments have provided some low rental housing but it was volunteers who invented such new solutions as co-op housing. Thousands of housing units have been built or saved through renovation by co-ops.

Resource Development — co-ops are equally active in the resource sector. In partnership with the national government, co-ops and credit unions have created a \$200-million Canadian energy company called Co-Enerco. It has already acquired a \$100-million foreign oil company. But that's only a beginning. Through the volunteers who own and manage the co-ops and credit unions, billions of dollars of new Canadian capital can be made available to meet our national energy needs.

Work Sharing — one of the most successful programs we have developed to deal with our unemployment crisis. Through this program, 60,000 Canadian workers who would otherwise have been laid off kept their jobs because 160,000 of their fellow workers volunteered to share their work. The success of work sharing is due to a partnership of employees, business, unions and government.

Inflation Reduction — we have all seen the results of the “6 & 5” program. This was a program with a significantly larger voluntary component than the program of mandatory controls instituted in 1975.

Nuclear Disarmament — perhaps the largest voluntary advocacy group working for change today is made up of those who are fighting for nuclear disarmament. I have little doubt that the massive human energy devoted to this cause will mean a better future for Canada and the world.

Education — the role of the voluntary sector is being recognized by educational institutions. York University, as well as other colleges and universities, now offers courses designed to train managers for the voluntary sector. Another college with which I am associated, Pearson College of the Pacific, has a curricular requirement that students go out into the community and provide a service one day per week. Co-op College in Saskatchewan has been providing training for volunteers for several years.

Tax Policy — in the past decade, Canadian voluntary organizations have undertaken to advise their governments about the kind of financial, administrative, and tax policies that would strengthen the voluntary sector. I believe it is time to emphasize the role the national government plays, and could play, in encouraging growth in the voluntary sector by creating a new Minister of Co-operative and Community Development.

I believe that volunteers have a tremendous influence on the shape of Canadian society and the Canadian economy. Voluntary action is no substitute for government action, for educators' actions, or for private business. But the voluntary sector has reached a size and influence that entitles it to equal consideration with the other major sectors of our society.

The work of Canadian volunteers cries out for recognition and for private and government support. That support should be forthcoming now. Volunteers have helped change the face of Canada for the better in the past, and they will be there to help, encourage and lead us in this current period of dramatic change.