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## **Reinventing Relationships**

### **52nd Annual Conference of the Canadian Library Association**

Libraries have been a part of my life since I was 5, when I was living in small towns in Atlantic Canada. During my career as a researcher, analyst and speechmaker, I have depended on libraries for resources. So it is an honour to be invited to join you today, at this huge conference. The way you do your work has changed dramatically over the 50 years since I first went to a library, and here you are talking about reinventing yourselves and your libraries.

L'innovation et la réinvention – sont les défis constants pour ceux et celles qui travaillent dans l'économie du savoir. Même si l'adaptation nous offre des répercussions positives, nous ne devons pas oublier que cette adaptation a des aspects humains et que les individus trouvent difficile le changement constant. C'est l'aspect humain que je veux adresser ce matin.

I have two objectives. I want to paint a picture for you of the dramatic transformation that is taking place in our society and of its repercussions for the people who walk into your libraries across the country. Then I want to describe a new tool for public dialogue which offers you an opportunity to connect with your clients/users in a new way, while providing an important service to your community.

The public dialogue kit is called *The Society We Want*. It is designed for use in any place where citizens gather and feel comfortable about talking about the values and principles that are most important to them.

But let me begin with the context – the sweeping changes in work, family, and the role of government which are rocking the very foundations of our lives.

### **Changing Nature of Work**

Work is being destandardized. Fewer people than ever have a long-standing, stable job with good career prospects and a good pension.

Jobs are being clustered into three groups:

1. The traditional full-time, long-term attachment;
2. the professional or contractual relationship; and
3. the non-standard or contingent relationship, which typically pays a low wage, offers few – if any – benefits, and is short-term or temporary. About 30 percent of jobs are in this last category.

Even within an organization – like a library – you will find all three.

Perhaps it is not surprising that job insecurity is an epidemic which affects many poor and low-skill people. But the polls also show that insecurity penetrates deep into the middle class. This is because the extraordinary competitive pressures in today's markets have led employers to shift more risk to their employees.

### **New Family Structures**

Families are fragmenting and becoming more chaotic. Most are stressed for time because the adults are all working, or want to work, and many are stressed for money (too little income or too much debt). The capacity of families to care for and nurture their own is badly stretched.

To illustrate the complexities of families today, listen to the story of a 25 year old woman and her partner, describing:

" .... our parents' eight marriages, four divorces, two common-law marriages and one separation. From this bounty, we have collected one "real" sister, and seven "real" grandparents, four half-siblings, four step-sisters, four step-parents, two step-grandmothers, two ex-step-parents, and one ex-step-brother."

Potentially, this is a very large extended family. But also, potentially, it is a fragmenting of family where there are no clear lines of responsibility for care-giving and emotional support, not to mention financial support.

For example, 1.5 million children live in families with only one parent, and two-thirds of those families are poor.

As families fragment into smaller units, individuals carry more responsibility and hence more risk.

### **The Changing Safety Net**

The public sector is reinventing itself, in a smaller, and, we hope, more efficient model, in response to excessive debt, global competitive pressures, and a much more pluralistic society. Governments are trying to invent a new conception of leadership, and new ways to deliver services through non-profits, corporations, and even families. At the same time, social programs are being reinvented in order to encourage self-reliance and reduce dependency on transfers.

Again, the state is shifting more risk onto the shoulders of individual citizens.

What we are witnessing is a three-way squeeze on the individual – from employers, from families, and from the state. Canadians are forced to cope with a lot more risk than they were 20 years ago.

Now there are two sides to risk-taking. It offers opportunities to make it big – there are real winners in this society. You can identify some of them by the fancy cars they drive and the fact that many are withdrawing from mainstream society to live in gated communities.

But there are also people who are losers – those whose jobs have disappeared, whose wages/hours have been cut, who experience poor health or family breakdown. Then there are the people who feel they will be losers because of high risks – they might lose their jobs. They feel helpless and insecure. They have lost their anchors.

When people are insecure, and feel they are losing control, they become angry, frustrated, alienated. They can become mean-spirited. In effect, insecurity divides us against ourselves.

That is why we created the dialogue kit *The Society We Want*. It gives Canadians the chance to define their core beliefs, and thus to become centred on the common good. That in turn gives them anchors.

### **What is Public Dialogue?**

Public opinion drives our society. This is top of the mind response of the "man in the street interview."

Public dialogue requires reflection, soul-searching. It is a form of public opinion that reflects more thoughtfulness, and that places more emphasis on the normative, valuing, ethical side of questions.

Public dialogue asks citizens to work through their opinions and their worries, and to listen to how others see the problem. They arrive at a public judgement.

It is not a technical judgement. There is no right or wrong answer.

It is no easier for a truck driver or a Ph.D.

It is not ethical judgement. We *are* concerned about good and evil, but we are struggling with two competing goods or trying to avoid two evils.

It is a political judgement, in the best sense of the word; compromise in a world that is far from ideal, and in a world where core values – compassion and self-reliance – can be in conflict.

### **How Does it Work?**

All you need is a discussion kit, which I will explain in a minute, and a group of 10 to 15 people, committed to spending 2 hours or so talking about what they value. They need a safe neutral space where it is okay not to have all the answers, where people from diverse backgrounds feel comfortable.

CPRN is a small research organization. We cannot organize discussion groups ourselves, so we have created the kit, and we offer support to places of worship, work, leisure and community service. Wouldn't you agree that libraries are an ideal place for a broad spectrum of Canadians to meet in public dialogue? (Other partners include Community foundations, the United Way, ecumenical groups and church groups.)

In the kit are five issue guides, focusing on Children, Work, Health, the Social Safety Net, and the Role of Government. Each guide requires at least 2 hours. So you have to choose one topic per session for each group.

Each guide presents conflicting choices to provoke discussion. Participants are encouraged to come up with their own choices.

At the end, the facilitator is asked to summarize a feedback form, which is sent back to our offices and archived at Carleton University.

### **What Will be the Outcome?**

The outcome can be described at three levels

1. Participants become more centred on what is important in their lives. They gain more respect for the views of others; and they begin to recognize the complexity of the choices facing political leaders. Some decide that they must become more active in their community, or in the political process.
2. In many cases, participants decide to become more engaged – one Anglican parish in Toronto developed a new mission statement for their programs for children and youth. The City of Guelph United Way and Social Planning Council intend to use their dialogue results to help them allocate their United Way budget this year. So the dialogue can help to focus energy on clear priorities.
3. Finally, the feedback form permits CPRN to synthesize the views of a very broad cross-section of Canadians. We publish a newsletter to get the news back to participants. We also use this information to brief ministers and officials, so that the results of the dialogue that takes place in your libraries can be transmitted into the public policy process.

### **Conclusions**

I started out this morning, by describing some of the ways in which our society is transforming. We have lost many of the old bonds that tied people together – in families, in churches, in neighbourhoods. So where do people gather today to talk over life's challenges? Many of them go to a coffee shop – hence the success of Starbucks. But many of them would be happy to go to their local library, if the library is ready to open its doors and its meeting spaces to them. A library is a safe, neutral space – a space where people can learn, can talk, can work through problems. It is an important civic space.

We need to talk about *The Society We Want* today because we can no longer assume that trends in public policy and sustained economic growth will automatically generate the kind of society that most Canadians want.

We are only beginning to realize that achieving the society we want takes hard work. The first step is to define the kind of society we want. And to do that, we need first to define the common good – the core in which we all believe – across all cultures and faiths in this country. Only then can we mobilize our energy to make that society come to pass.

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