What We Owe To Ourselves and Each Other

April 6, 2001 – The democratic state is, ideally, the embodiment of our collective will. The idea of a "social contract" is to capture at a particular time society's notion of the respective responsibilities of the citizen and the state. Just where do we draw the line between our responsibility for ourselves and our responsibility for each other? What does each of us have a right to expect of society as a whole, and what is our commitment in return?

The answers to these questions help define what it means to be a Canadian, or a citizen of Ontario, Alberta or Nova Scotia, or perhaps even what it means to be a member of a specific city or community. Seen in this light, the major changes to social programs in the 80s and 90s, for example, in effect rewrote the social contract, albeit without a great deal of public debate over the implications for our notions of individual and collective responsibility.

With the fiscal crisis behind us and the prospect of better economic times ahead, it is a good time to assess whether we think the current balance of responsibility implicit in our social policies is appropriate. Such an inquiry may find some of our social policies demand too much of the individual, while others demand too much of the collective, but the idea that social policy should be run through the sieve of our social values is an important one.

Last month, at the Niagara conference on Ontario in the 21st Century, CPRN's President, Judith Maxwell, made the case for a political effort to engage the public in determining the appropriate balance between individual and collective responsibility for the new century.

You can access or download a Powerpoint version of her presentation by clicking here.

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