

## **Public Interest Alberta Annual General Meeting Edmonton June 3, 2006**

**Speaking Notes: Mary Pat MacKinnon, Director, Public  
Involvement Network, Canadian Policy Research Networks**

### ***Democracy is a Contact Sport – Building Citizenship Skills and Practices: Seven Steps to a Better Body Politic***

To paraphrase Dickens: it's the best of times and the worst of times in Alberta.

Alberta is:

- rich, diverse, and vibrant with a promising future.
- the fastest growing province in Canada attracting many graduates with skills and ideas
- full of well educated people with lots of civic pride and a tradition of volunteering
- home to a strong tradition of democratic movements including the early feminists (Persons Case), the Progressives, the United Farmers of Alberta, the CCF, social gospel etc.

Alberta is also a place with:

- Declining voter turnouts, especially among younger people, Aboriginal people and ethnic and visible minorities
- a history of one party domination, weak opposition parties where dissent and difference are at risk
- significant numbers of voters don't see their votes translated into representation.
- an undercurrent of resentment about eastern domination and arrogance, fuelling a separation movement that ebbs and flows

Of course some of these characteristics are shared by other provinces and other countries too, especially the democratic malaise.

A European based policy foundation in a recent newsletter warned that:

“ we see different aspects of a democratic deficit whose persistence in France, as in the rest of the world, is rightly worrisome. We discern at the root of this phenomenon a kind of loss of substance, an exhaustion which deforms the idea of democracy into dry prescription, and freezes behaviour in modes of imitation, protest or skepticism. It is our responsibility to initiate a debate in order to produce meaning, restore significance and rediscover the enthusiasm of the first promoters of the democratic idea.” (Franck Debie, Editorial, Executive Director, Fondation pour L’innovation politique, Newsletter No.12 May 2005)

Alberta truly has an opportunity at this juncture in its history to use its wealth, its wonderful human assets to build a prosperous, just and democratic society. I hope my remarks this afternoon contribute in some small way to furthering the work you have begun with the May 12 Democracy conference and your recently formed Democracy task force.

I’m asking us to step back from a pervasive trend that treats all politics with disdain, (and not without some good reasons) to dare to think about political governance differently – as a way of solving problems that is vastly superior to all of the other methods civilization has tried and indeed continue to use in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America– authoritarian rule, feudalism, divine right of kings, modern day totalitarianism, fascism. To paraphrase Churchill – democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others.

And yes – democracy is certainly far from perfect but it is nonetheless a daring creation that will continue to be by definition, a work in progress. But like anything we care about, if we neglect it, either by sins of omission or commission, it won’t flourish.

I’m suggesting a citizenship fitness regime for a healthier democracy that emphasizes participation, skills development, discipline and results. It won’t be easy; it will take creativity and patience. It’s all about creating better democratic habits and practice that calls upon each of us wherever we are – in community or neighborhood groups, in professional and labour organizations, in governments, in our families, in our places of worship, in our book clubs – to embrace action for different way of practicing large P politics.

As an Australian colleague Lyn Carson says our democratic and citizenship muscles are in danger of atrophy: we are out of the habit of using them and we need to get in shape.

If we don't exercise them, we can't expect them to work well and the rest of our body suffers. Or to use another analogy – used by educators Joel Westheimer and Sharon Cook of the University of Ottawa's Democratic Dialogue: *Collaborative Research in Democracy, Education, and Society* - democracy is not self-winding. We have to make sure the mechanisms of our democracy – with its many and varied gears and levers – work well together.

I have been struck by a recurrent theme running through a sampling of recent diverse readings, where the authors are calling for revitalized citizenship.

Let me share a few ideas and quotes:

**Henry Milner in Civic Literacy** talks about an upheaval in the world of ideas that transcends academic disciplines – a debate about citizenship that wrestles with what he calls the *“decline and possible reawakening of community or civil society, and speculates about the causes and consequences of apparently eroding civic engagement and political participation.”* Milner's work is motivated by his desire for clarity about what knowledge is needed to exercise the responsibilities of citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But I get ahead of myself.

**The late Jane Jacobs in Dark Age Ahead** worries that we are taking democratic practice and habits for granted and that we do so at our peril.

*“ any culture that jettisons the values that have given it competence, adaptability and identity becomes weak and hollow. A culture can avoid that hazard only by tenaciously retaining the underlying values responsible for the culture's nature and success.... I know of no better expression of its core values than the words voiced by Lincoln- that the government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth” (176)*

**Tim Flannery in Weather Makers** turns to citizens as the best bet to avert ecological disaster

*‘ We cannot wait for the problem to be solved for us... If you vote for a politician who has a deep commitment to reducing CO2 emissions, you*

*might change the world. If you alone can achieve so much, so too can every individual, and in time, industry and government on Earth....It is my firm belief that all the efforts of government and industry will come to naught unless the good citizen and consumer takes the initiative, and in tackling climate change, the consumer is in the most fortunate position."*

Washington journalist **Joe Kline** in **Politics Lost – How American Democracy has been trivialized by People who think you are stupid** thinks Americans need to rediscover citizenship.

*" we are drifting, I fear, toward a flaccid, hollowed-out democracy where honest debate is impossible – a democracy without citizenship. He worried that "the habits of citizenship – the service, sacrifice, and discipline that had distinguished his own "greatest generation" – were allowed to fade amidst the narcotic haze of the Great Affluence. Worse, civic irresponsibility was encouraged (83)*

He writes that the only way to get change is *"if the public chooses not to vote for those who indulge in the prevailing political banality" And of course this needs aware and thinking citizens...."*

**Scholar Thomas Homer Dixon** in a presentation to the Crossing Boundaries National Council last November stressed our world needs more than anything else what he called "the deliberative citizen and consumer"

What these diverse thinkers from Canada, the United States, Australia and Europe share is a belief in the importance of re-awakening the spirit of citizenship.

So back to our fitness regime

You should know that this regime draws in part on the vision and actions identified by 144 randomly recruited 18-25 year olds CPRN brought together recently (this is the same generation that many commentators despair about – citing their disinclination to vote and their perceived apathy – which by the way certainly wasn't our experience) and other citizens who have participated in CPRN citizen dialogues – about 2500 since 2000.

Our dialogues feature full day or longer sessions, with carefully prepared workbooks providing factual information and a range of

different policy choices, pre and post questionnaires, professional facilitation, qualitative and quantitative analysis and transparent reporting to policy makers and the participants.

We find that the dialogues whet people's appetite for public engagement. They are designed to insert public values and policy preferences into public policy and help decision makers define the policy space within which decisions should be taken.

Let me take a moment to talk about what we've learned from citizens.

I'll highlight 5 insights

1. there is a large untapped potential for CE. People want to become more engaged in public policy. They are not satisfied with voting every 4 years. EKOS has been tracking the public's views on citizen engagement since 1998 (2000, 2002, 2005). The 2005 survey reveals that the vast majority of Canadians would feel better about government decisions if they knew that citizens were consulted on a regular basis. Most feel that there are too few citizen engagement initiatives. (EKOS, iii, 2005)
2. People reaffirm the role of government as guardian of the public interest on the condition that citizens have an active and meaningful role in informing policy and that accountability is improved.
3. People want a higher standard of governance and greater accountability. As Janice Gross Stein says: *" if accountability itself is not connected to fundamental human and social values underpinning our social institutions but is left to its own self-referential orbit of technical measures referring to technical values such as efficiency, the whole business can become little more than fiction. (quoted in Menzies, No Time p.9)*
4. They want to see Canadian values and ethical behaviour reflected in decisions and by our public figures.
5. The public may be readier to make tougher choices than politicians realize. When given an opportunity to go beyond top of mind opinion, wish lists and venting, and learn more about the complexity of choice making, they are prepared to confront difficult choices and the consequences.

So, what does our fitness regime look like both for us and for our political leaders?

What can we do and what do we expect of our institutions?

I realize this is ambitious and I know we need a long view but I take comfort in the words of Jane Goodall who said that “ the collective decisions of well-meaning people are going to start changing the world” (Harvest of Hope, 2005)

**1. Quite simply start with becoming informed about public policies and how government works.**

- Just as it helps to understand some basics of anatomy when we start to exercise, so too, it is not unreasonable that we take some time and effort to become informed about public affairs. Now I realize that Public Interest Alberta and all of you in your respective organizations already do this or you wouldn't be here. But can you do more to encourage your peer group and others outside your normal circles to do this? Are you helping them see the connections between politics and society - between political decisions and their every day lives?
  - And what about our families – do we talk about public issues in a mature and constructive way at our dinner tables. Do we encourage our children to think about different perspectives of an issue so that we are really deliberating on what route we should follow in addressing problems? Do we help them sort through the tough choices in public life? Or do we give facile answers to questions that really deserve much more thought? Perhaps our greatest hope for stemming the decline in our democratic well-being is to equip our young people with the desire and capacity to be active citizens.
  - Do have high expectations for politicians and those in public life but do remember that mistakes and wrong doing will happen because they like us are mere mortals not gods. We should be judicious in our harshest criticism and save it for what really matters. At the same time, we need to exercise our citizenship in protesting vigorously against decisions that are not in

the public interest or are contrary to a health democracy and advocate for policies that we think are in the public interest.

## **2. JUST DO IT - Participate in political and civic activities**

- Knowledge without action doesn't take us very far. Public Interest Alberta is already doing this. And kudos for the recent Democracy conference. The creation of the Democracy task force in the context of an upcoming provincial election offers great opportunities for Albertans to become engaged. You will need to use every possible resource to get the message out to raise awareness and encourage people to participate and to persist in this.

## **3. Engage with others outside your circles (preaching just to the converted won't change political culture)**

- Democratic practice means that we accept diversity of perspectives, that we value different viewpoints and choose to use reasoned discussion that respects differences in trying to come to agreement on issues.
- In our citizen dialogues we use 10 ground rules for dialogue. Participants often remark on how helpful they are. They include:
  - the purpose of a dialogue is to understand and to learn from one another;
  - be open and listen to others even when you disagree, and suspend judgment;
  - search for assumptions (especially your own);
  - express disagreement in terms of ideas, not personality or motives;
  - keep dialogue and decision-making as separate activities – dialogue should always come before debate.
- Citizen participants take to this quite a bit better than our legislators.

#### 4. Challenge and demand higher quality media coverage

- The media play an essential role in democracy to help inform people about public affairs and of how politicians are doing. Too often journalists / editors opt for controversial, trivial, sensational, polarized and / or superficial coverage. Our media culture is good at generating shared ignorance, fear and outrage but not so good at generating shared understanding, shared compassion and commitment to justice (Woodruff, 2004)
- The emergence of what has been called 'civic journalism' that seeks to provide thoughtful and useful analysis to help people deliberate on difficult issues, while in its early days, (and far from widespread) is a helpful development.
- It would also help if our politicians, experts and public servants use language that can be understood by the public.
- Part of this is about having clearer political language. Don Watson a former speech writer for Australian politicians wrote a book called: **Death Sentences: How Clichés, Weasel words and Management Speak are Stragglng Public Language.** His message -
  - *"Clear, precise language is good for democracy and for society. Active language incites activity. It helps to establish trust between the governors and the governed and the managers and the managed. Honesty and good intentions and deceit and incompetence are more easily recognized (35)*
 – is one our politicians, speech writers and journalists should think about.

The final three actions involve institutional changes – unless citizens and groups like Public Interest Alberta push hard for them the odds aren't good that they'll come about.

#### 5. Revitalize Civics education and raise civic literacy

- Advocate for a vibrant civics curriculum that really equips students to become active citizens, ready to participate in political and civic life through a rethink and redesign of

civic education that emphasizes participation. This would move civics from an option to wiring it into the DNA of schools K to 12.

- The UK and Australia have both made citizenship education a statutory subject. The UK Crick report called on the government to “create a culture of active citizenship by teaching knowledge, skills and values that comprise political literacy” (Milner, 119).
- Take civic literacy into adulthood through a life long approach. Henry Milner’s comparative work reveals that Scandinavian countries, Sweden in particular, have high levels of civic literacy and civic engagement. This didn’t happen by accident – it has resulted from a comprehensive strategy to encourage adults to acquire and use information especially through participation in adult education” (121) through institutions like study circles.
- In 1997 there were 11 adult education organizations representing different sectors of society, which held 336,037 study circles (35- 40 hours) with a total of 2.8 million participants. About one-third of these involved political-social issues.

## **6. Renew our political practices and institutions**

- Our political parties are in trouble – party memberships are at all time lows and most Canadians do not look to political parties to help them bring about change (average age of party member is 59 – Cross, 2005). Political parties need to move beyond defensive attitudes to take a hard look at really engaging the public and invest much more in policy development.
- And there is ample evidence that the time has come to re-examine our electoral system to create a more representative institutions. Neither Alberta nor Canada is doing well on representation – still overwhelming middle aged white guys. Women make up just over one-fifth of our federal parliament – only 11% of Conservative MPs are women. We are making progress on this front. 5 provinces are or have looked at electoral reform. Inspired by the example of the B.C. Citizens Assembly, Ontario has just created a Citizens Assembly composed of randomly

recruited citizens who will spend 9 months deliberating and talking to fellow citizens about a new electoral system for Ontario.

- Other institutional changes that would make politicians more relevant to citizens are legislative and parliamentary reform that builds the capacity of individual MLAs and MPs to connect with her or his members on policy (going beyond their typical ombudsman roles). A range of reforms have been proposed to strengthen the role of the MP/MLA and reduce the excessive concentration of power in the executive – both in Canada and the UK. (Power Commission 2006, Aucoin/Turnbull 2006)

## **7. Insist on greater transparency and accountability in public life**

- Part of changing our democratic practice is closer attention to transparency and accountability in public life. This requires effective access to information legislation of course, but equally important a competent and diligent media that takes politics seriously and above all a political culture that demands transparency.
- The Scandinavian countries are likely the best example of such cultures – and this spills over to their relations with their European cousins. For instance, they have been vocal proponents of greater transparency in European Union operations. (Milner 115)

Popping a vitamin won't negate the effects of smoking, over-eating or lack of exercise. To continue the analogy, neither is there a short cut, a quick fix to a healthier democracy. That's the bad news but the good news is just as people come to love or at least to like exercise, once they're acquired the skills and muscles, so too will the exercise of democracy be more fulfilling and meaningful once we've toned our participatory muscles.

In closing I want to share 2 visions – the first articulates the vision of a young Albertan woman who participated in our dialogue and summit last November.

*"We see Canada as a dynamic place to live in, full of activism, participation and inclusion. We want government not to be something*

*untouchable, but rather a community in which we not only hear what everyone has to say, but we truly listen and care about issues relevant to our people. We want citizens to know why they are paying taxes, to understand how the system works, and to have the chance to have their voices heard in decision-making.” (iii, CPRN, 2006)*

The second I took from Adam Hochschild’s book on the citizens’ movement that led to the abolition of slavery (***Bury the Chains – Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves 2005***). He wrote:

“To the British abolitionists, the challenge of ending slavery in a world that considered it fully normal was as daunting as it seems today when we consider challenging the entrenched wrongs of our own age: the vast gap between rich and poor nations, the relentless spread of nuclear weapons, the multiple assaults on the earth, air and water...the habit of war. None of these problems will be solved overnight, or perhaps even in the 50 years it took to end British slavery. But they will not be solved at all unless people see them as both outrageous and solvable, just as slavery was felt to be by the 12 men who gathered in James Phillips’s printing shop in George Yard on May 22, 1787.

...The riveting parade of first hand testimony he and his colleagues put together in the Abstract of the Evidence and countless other documents is one of the first great flowerings of a very modern belief: that the way to stir men and women to action is not by biblical argument, but through the vivid, unforgettable description of acts of great injustice done to their fellow human beings. The abolitionists placed their hope not in sacred texts, but in human empathy.

We live with that hope still.” (365-366)

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Public Interest Alberta is leading the way in creating space and tools for public dialogue. It is a privilege to participate in your annual meeting and first public interest award ceremony.

I look forward to our discussions.

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