

Working for the Poor and Disadvantaged: Reflections at the End of the 1990s

The basis for organizing the poor and disadvantaged has changed radically in the past decade. A new and broader approach is needed if the poor and disadvantaged are to get an even modestly larger share of society's rich resources.

Beginning in the years after the Second World War, there was widespread agreement on the benefits of improved social justice. From the 1950s through the 1970s, government and business leaders endorsed the idea of the active state to achieve this goal. While the changes that did occur may not have been fast enough or comprehensive enough, and in some cases not well enough thought out, the goodwill in society was palpable. It seemed that for every social problem, for every community challenge, there was an appropriate program that could be put in place.

The Caledon Institute launched the community stories series to enable individuals involved in capacity-building initiatives to reflect upon and write about their work. This series provides a vehicle for community leaders to tell their stories in their own words.

Working with the poor and disadvantaged was straightforward in this milieu. In brief, it involved helping them to discover their self-interest and proposing a remedy for the perceived problems. If, for some reason, decision-makers weren't willing to give fair consideration to the solutions proposed, the group might plan a demonstration, followed by a compromise with which most were willing to live.

Then, in the early 1980s, the cultural and political landscape began to shift. Decision-makers didn't continue to build that inclusive sense of society that had been embarked on so strongly in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, many slipped into the idea that individually each person could make a killing on the market – the real estate or stock market – so each could be financially protected in the future. And when the bubble burst in central Canada in 1989, the social network that had been allowed to atrophy for several years began to fall apart. Political and financial leaders began to talk about the needs of the economy and the imperative of the market that many had been trying to exploit.

The federal government ended social housing programs in the early 1990s, then changed legislation for the financing of health care and social programs. Federal politicians claimed they simply were dealing with financial problems – an explanation that soothed many. Then provincial governments followed suit. When Ottawa began to pass its financial obligations down the line, provincial governments starved their social programs for money.

The old ways of organizing the poor and disadvantaged don't work in this new milieu because one is unable to rely on the public value of a strong and inclusive society. Government leaders don't respond to appeals based on social equity. For many in the middle class, this profound shift in values has not been readily apparent. For them, life has continued on mostly unchanged in spite of the cuts to social programs, such as Unemployment Insurance and social housing. Those changes affected other people, and while sympathy was felt and expressed, no political mechanisms were developed which addressed the underlying changes in values.

But as is often the case with major social change, lessons are learned in unexpected ways and political understanding develops within processes designed for entirely different purposes. Experiences force people to rethink basic outlooks. That was the impact of the 'megacity' on many people in Toronto: Fighting the megacity gave the middle class an important understanding of the new values which heretofore were hidden from their view.

The example of C4LD

In the case of Toronto, the issue which sparked the shift in, social values was the megacity – the forced amalgamation of the

municipalities that comprise Metropolitan Toronto. The organizational process which was created to fight the megacity, Citizens for Local Democracy (C4LD), also served to cast new light on changing social values.

Rumours of the impending megacity began circulating in earnest in late November 1996, and a group of citizens first met to discuss the issue in mid-December just as the provincial government introduced megacity legislation. The group continued to meet weekly and numbers grew very quickly. By late January, more than 1,500 people were attending each meeting.

Many felt amalgamation was uncalled for and unreasonable. One galvanizing event was a municipal referendum on the issue scheduled for March 3. The anticipation of that event was a powerful force in attracting people to meetings, culminating in a meeting on the evening of March 3 in Massey Hall attended by more than 2,600 people. Although 76 percent of voters were against the megacity, the next day the Minister of Municipal Affairs said he believed a majority of people were in favour and the government simply pushed ahead.

The purpose of C4LD meetings was ostensibly to express opposition to the megacity, but there were two unexpected outcomes: A new style of organization emerged, and the focus moved from the megacity as a discrete political issue to the larger social and political changes besetting society in Toronto and Canada more generally. By chance or happenstance, C4LD created a new way to move forward.

Issues and structures

C4LD began with a campaign against Bill 103 which enacted the megacity. C4LD's first

principles focused upon local government, stressing that local government belongs and should be responsible to the local citizens who elected it, not the provincial government. C4LD also emphasized that changes should be made only with the consent of local citizens.

Three weeks after the release of Bill 103, the provincial government, in its famous megaweek of January 6, 1997, unleashed other legislation which C4LD thought was equally wrong-headed. The new legislation destroyed local control of public education and it down-loaded many social costs onto property taxpayers. The response of C4LD was to change its basic principles into a three-pronged strategy which repeated the values about local government stated that citizens should have the democratic right to control their local education and local schools proclaimed that property taxes should not be used to fund social programs.

This widening of the agenda meant that the megacity issue, which had been central to C4LD's early activity, broadened to include these other edges. Indeed, at its January meetings, C4LD discussed other issues as well: the new legislation proposing to transfer water and sewage facilities from provincial to municipal control, leading to privatization; the provincial proposal to cut funding to public libraries; and the changes to the general financial arrangements between provincial and municipal governments. By April, C4LD also was addressing the question of hospital closings. By June, the agenda included Bill 136 which took away the right to strike from all municipal employees and forced them into binding arbitration conducted by arbitrators appointed by the Harris government. Bill 142, which completely changed welfare programs in Ontario, also became a matter of considerable debate.

These issues were accompanied by a set of experiences that few C4LD members had expected. One of C4LD's first initiatives after the announcement of the megacity bill was to push the government to allow those who wished to speak to the bill an opportunity to do so. Hearings were extended from a planned two-week period to six weeks and more than 600 briefs – many from individuals who had never before made a public presentation – were submitted to the committee. At the same time, a massive appeal was launched by citizens to their local Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPPs).

The results of these initiatives were illuminating. The briefs had no apparent impact on the government despite the wide publicity they received. At the end of the hearings, the government introduced amendments which bore no relationship to any of the briefs any presenters – either for or against the megacity – had made to the committee. Most presenters and members of the public were appalled that there had been so little influence by these publications. Moreover, local Conservative MPPs refused to attend most public meetings, engage in debate with their constituents or answer phone calls. There were some examples where an MPP did appear in public – Al Leach, Minister of Municipal Affairs attended a hostile meeting in affluent Rosedale – but on those occasions MPPs were booed routinely and loudly criticized. Nevertheless, the Conservative government showed no intention of changing its course.

It was a significant learning experience for many people to realize that they had no power or influence, that they were disenfranchised and that the government had no intention of being accountable to anyone other than its own advisors. This was probably the first time that many of the middle-class individuals who attended

C4LD meetings found themselves in exactly the same position the poor and disadvantaged find themselves on a daily basis: They were unable to influence decision-makers, in any way. This realization meant that they were much more amenable to recognizing the claims of the poor and disadvantaged. A strong link emerged between the issues of democracy raised by the megacity legislation and the issues of social equity raised by other government initiatives.

By the time C4LD drafted a list of civic priorities for the November 1997 municipal election, the link between these issues was made explicit. The three basic principles adopted by C4LD in September of 1997 were as follows:

- At the local level, the new city must include strong, effective and democratic decision-making structures similar to the six existing city councils.
- Those elected must be people who have shown they want to involve citizens and communities in decision-making at City Hall. They must be people who disagreed with the idea of forced amalgamation in the first place and who agree that decisions should be ‘made in public by elected (not appointed) officials, on the basis of supporting evidence and justification publicly debated and evaluated before decisions are made.
- Those elected must implement programs which will promote a more fair distribution of money, power and resources among all people living in the new city; which respect local values and resist the effects of globalization; and which lessen stress on the physical environment.

C4LD unexpectedly became a forum for open discussion on democracy and social equity.

Virtually every Monday meeting, speakers debated different aspects of both issues. This type of discussion certainly did not occur in any constructive way at Queen’s Park, nor was it a regular subject of debate at municipal councils. C4LD was one of the few Toronto venues where this debate took place every week.

The discussion was not without tension. On more than one occasion, the suggestion was made that C4LD should concern itself only with the issue of democracy and let others deal with the issue of social equity since some middle-class people might be put off by arguments around equity. But this position did not win the day at C4LD meetings where agreement on the link between democracy and social equity consistently was agreed on.

And so, by chance, C4LD served the purpose of actually talking about the state of society and the interests of the poor and disadvantaged. It put this issue on the agenda when nobody else seemed to want to do so in such a political fashion. Others, such as the United Way, were willing to talk about the poor and disadvantaged, provided the discussion did not become too political or critical towards the provincial government. C4LD asked its members to take a strong position in opposition to Bill 142 which destroyed the welfare system in Ontario; United Way was silent on this major piece of legislation. In short, C4LD looked for a bridge, for common ground upon which political action might be taken on these two issues. It sought out the constituency for democracy and social equity.

The shape of C4LD

C4LD was never planned to be a new kind of organization: Its shape was simply a response to the changes with which it had to deal. It was faced with a government moving at lightning

speed, where very little information was publicly available. There was significant public interest and since the issue involved municipal politics, it was not overlaid with the labels of political parties. All these factors helped shape C4LD.

C4LD was a forum for ideas and not a repository of policy. While the organization was guided by some general principles, in the first six months it never made any attempt to be careful about the precision of these beliefs, and it never required those attending meetings to ‘sign on.’ Instead, people came to C4LD as a group focus sed around the megacity and other significant public issues.

C4LD was a source of nonpartisan information. At each meeting, speakers would report what had happened during the previous week. Since the three Toronto daily newspapers all strongly supported the government’s megacity plan, their news coverage was extremely biased and often did not report important events. People were attracted to C4LD meetings because this information was not available elsewhere.

The nonpartisan information was mirrored by nonpartisan opinion. Many of the opinions expressed were not linked to a political party. When a partisan opinion was voiced, a speaker from the other party in opposition was invited to contribute to the discussion.

C4LD created a strong sense of community. There was the feeling at the large Monday meetings in the first quarter of 1997 that those attending were part of a group that cared about truth, social justice and democracy. This feeling was important in a city where the media seemed to have little interest in these three issues.

C4LD also considered itself a group interested in political action. Meetings were not held simply to let people hear interesting or char-

ismatic speeches, nor was their purpose simply to relay information. Discussions helped individuals sort out the kinds of political actions that seemed reasonable and in which they wished to be involved. At many meetings, suggestions were made about the actions people could take.

C4LD meetings offered a smorgasbord of political actions. Individuals relied primarily on a sense of community to determine initiatives rather than on a set of beliefs and instructions being generated by people on the steering committee or presumed to beat the ‘centre’ of the organization.

The structural devices that emerged in C4LD included the following elements:

A ‘loose’ organization – C4LD did not see itself as an organization which advocates on behalf of its members. On the occasions when those present voiced a collective opinion, a letter was written by the steering committee indicating that a certain decision was taken, but that has been relatively rare. Instead, C4LD was a forum where people came together to speak to each other, and take their own action. When people said: “C4LD should do x,” the response was often: “You should do x and get other people to join with you.” As an organization it was loose, creating a community of people who took their own action as they thought appropriate.

Open meetings – Monday evening meetings were held in a public place such as a large church or city council chambers, and anyone who wanted to attend was invited. All present were encouraged to participate in discussion and decision-making. C4LD has had no membership list and no members, although it did have the telephone numbers of those who had attended meetings and asked to be notified of future meetings.

Phone tree – All participants were invited to sign their name and leave a telephone contact number. At an early meeting of C4LD, a phone tree was established. The tree consisted of volunteers who each called about 20 people every weekend, reminding them of the Monday evening meeting and mentioning any confirmed speakers or events. By mid-February, the list included 2,000 names and there were more than 100 callers. The phone tree proved a very cost-effective way of notifying people about meetings.

Newsletter – A newsletter was published every few weeks. It had an attractive graphic design and was inexpensive to print. Copies of the newsletter were available at all meetings and – people were encouraged to take copies and distribute them at work and at home. Some issues were printed in large quantities and distributed on the public transit system. About 20,000 copies of one issue were distributed on the subway system in early February 1997. By January 1998, 25 issues of the newsletter had been published.

Hot line – A ‘hot line’ telephone number was established where callers could pick up current information (the hot line message was changed daily since it was established in early January 1997) and leave messages. The hot line often listed the time and place of political actions that C4LDers were asked to consider joining. It proved an easy and inexpensive way of keeping people informed.

Website and electronic strategy – In the first few weeks of the organization, a website was created where newsletters, speeches, reports and other information could be posted. This site was kept up to date and was not only an excellent source of readily accessible, detailed information, but also an archive of the actions in which C4LD had been involved since its inception. At the height of the megacity struggle in the spring 1997,

there were 7,000 contacts with the site every week.

On-line venues also were created where C4LDers could exchange views and gossip. This exchange often served as the early warning system for the organization, since all those signed on to the lists immediately received the posted information. Unlike most chat lists on the internet, the C4LD lists were open: They were facilitated but not controlled, so anyone could post anything. This open strategy proved very effective for C4LD. The website and other electronic strategies have acted as a model for other citizen groups.

Steering committee – A steering committee of about 15 people was created after the first meeting of the group. The committee was the administrative arm of C4LD, planning Monday meetings, discussing and suggesting general strategies, approving copy for newsletters, managing finances and generally making sure things ran smoothly. The committee tried to ensure that important decisions were made by the participants at the Monday meetings rather than by the committee. Various attempts were made to broaden the numbers on the committee (some people naturally dropped off) and to ensure it was representative of the larger group.

Finances – C4LD made a decision early on not to take any funding from governments. All funding came from collections at meetings or appeals for money. About \$75,000 was raised during the first year and a similar amount was spent on printing, meeting space, events (such as the very successful Democracy Parade, which attracted 9,000 people) and several theatrical performances.

C4LD was fortunate in its ability to survive on an immense amount of volunteer help for

things like graphic design and writing for newsletters. Generally, no one in C4LD was paid compensation for any time spent working for the organization.

In conclusion, C4LD emerged as a different kind of organization, one that served those who came to meetings by offering them a community of interest where they could seek out others to share their ideas and actions.

Responding to the new milieu

The primary challenge in working with the poor and disadvantaged is putting back on the public agenda the notion that we are all part of a community in which the well-being of each individual matters. Without this basic shared value, it is impossible to advocate successfully for programs which lessen disparities and create greater equity.

C4LD is one of the few large community-based groups in Toronto that has made this value a centrepiece of its activities. It has recognized the link between democracy and social justice and its activities have advocated both.

These are functions that should be central to the political life of the country and should be part of the daily discourse around public decisions. Unfortunately, that is not the case, for the reasons already noted. Thus, discussion about democracy and social equity does not form the basis of debates at Queen's Park or City Hall. Indeed, C4LD is one of the few public places where such discussion occurs on a regular basis.

C4LD's actions were a reasonable response to the new milieu, and the organization

has prepared the groundwork for those who, hopefully, once more will make these values central to the political life of Canada. C4LD was structured in such a way that it allowed for considerable diversity in approaches to democracy and social justice. It had not cluttered the path with ideology, membership or other exclusionary techniques.

C4LD itself has not taken on the job of working directly with the poor and disadvantaged, nor is it expected to do so in the foreseeable future. However, those who are part of C4LD are likely to engage in these activities themselves, gaining sustenance from C4LD's activities.

And when C4LD finally comes to an end, as happens sooner or later with most community-based volunteer organizations, it will have left a strong legacy. It will have created a new set of networks between people who share the common ground which must be re-established if the cause of the poor and disadvantaged is to be served. C4LD also will have demonstrated how a group concerned about basic values can be successful at a time when the public sector is being shrunk at the expense of the weakest members of our society. C4LD offers a model which others can expect to build on as they work for the poor and disadvantaged.

John Sewell

John Sewell served for 14 years on Toronto city council including one term as mayor. He has a diverse career, mostly spent around municipal and housing issues, and currently writes a weekly column on urban affairs for Toronto's NOW magazine. He has been a leader in C4LD since its inception.

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

K1Y 4N7

Canada

Ph: (613) 729-3340 Fx: (613) 729-3896

e-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org

website: <http://www.caledoninst.org>