

This edition of *real leaders* profiles three individuals who have contributed to social well-being through their involvement in political life. **John Godfrey**, Member of Parliament for the Toronto riding of Don Valley West, focusses his efforts on children's concerns and the promotion of early childhood development. Former Senator **Erminie Cohen** continues to be actively involved in issues of poverty and women's health. **John Amagoalik** is known as the Father of Nunavut for his key role in the creation of the territory of Nunavut.

John Godfrey is a political figure who believes in the importance of "acting locally but also thinking and acting nationally" in order to effect positive social change.

Currently a Liberal Member of Parliament for the Toronto riding of Don Valley West, Godfrey has had an exceptional career and has worked in a number of different areas throughout his professional life. He served as Editor of the *Financial Post*, was Vice-President of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research and taught at Dalhousie University.



John Godfrey is Member of Parliament for Don Valley West.

But in all those fields, Godfrey's passion for political and social issues shone through. With a keen interest in children's issues, he now serves as Chairman of the National Children's Agenda Caucus Committee, and of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Children and Youth at Risk.

Godfrey realized early in his career that an investment in children would benefit all sectors of society, and would enhance Canada's future social vitality and economic prosperity.

He is a strong advocate of the notion that it is crucial to ensure the primary needs of all children are met in the first few years of their lives. The promotion of early childhood development can have long-term benefits that will extend throughout a child's life, engendering positive consequences in adulthood.

Godfrey decided that the best formula for a devoted Member of Parliament such as himself was to concentrate his efforts on one important cause. "Instead of spreading myself too thin, I decided to become an expert in a particular area," he explains.

When asked about his work with children in the community, Godfrey clarified that the term 'community' has several different meanings to him. His work in Ottawa as a federal politician has a community impact that is quite different from his 'hands-on' work in his constituency. At the national level, John Godfrey's work with the community refers to working with a group of like-minded individuals as an active member of a caucus and of a standing committee that transcends partisan lines.

After working for the *Financial Post*, Godfrey became Vice-President of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIAR). His involvement with the CIAR gave him the opportunity to work on two important programs related to population health and human development. Out of this experience grew a profound aspiration to convert leading-edge ideas into government policy.

Dr. Fraser Mustard, founder of the CIAR, is considered a pioneer in the field of population health and human development research. Dr. Mustard maintains that Godfrey has a good understanding of the key issues of technological change, economic growth, the social determinants of health and the role of human development with respect to children. "These issues became part of his mantra in dealing with Her Majesty's government as a Member of Parliament," Mustard says. "He has pushed those agendas continuously and has pushed to get the National Children's Agenda into place."

After becoming a Member of Parliament, Godfrey subsequently became the Chair of the National Children's Agenda Caucus Committee. The committee is dedicated to providing a range of programs and services that effectively support early childhood development; children thrive within families and communities that meet and exceed their physical and developmental needs.

The committee focusses its work on three themes: readiness to learn, provision of services for all children prenatal to age 6 and community mobilization. This caucus group was recognized by the Prime Minister for being the most successful in putting children on the national agenda. Godfrey is a strong believer that if you concentrate your ideas in one area, they will be more powerful.

He is also a member of a subcommittee of Human Resources Development Canada called 'Children and Youth at Risk.' This nonpartisan group of like-minded politicians "parks [their] guns at the door," as Godfrey puts it, before taking part in this activity that is over and above their regular duties.



John Godfrey and his son Ian, age 8, in Nova Scotia.

Godfrey's book, *The Canada We Want: Competing Visions for the New Millennium*, which he co-authored in 1999, summarizes his goals very succinctly. "The goal of the National Project would be to make Canada the best country in the world for the care and nurturing of young children." Godfrey emphatically points out that an investment in Canada's children is an investment in the country's future: "If we could say that Canada had the best prenatal programs, the lowest child poverty rates, the best parenting centres and parenting courses, the lowest rates of child abuse, and the best early childhood care and education programs, all of which culminated in the best rates of school readiness by age 6, the positive consequences for Canada would be enormous."

Godfrey is also involved with the Assembly of First Nations and with various programs in this arena. He maintains that it is crucial to "focus on child issues from a number of different angles and not allow efforts to dissipate."

At the national level, Godfrey finds it effective to form groups that comprise individuals with similar goals. The next step is then to form coalitions with nongovernmental organizations and think tanks that are directly involved in child care. The objective, Godfrey emphasizes, is to learn who the allies are in this field across Canada. He maintains that this job goes beyond party politics and aims to identify who is most passionate about

children's issues. It then becomes a matter of helping those individuals and groups to develop better communication ties, a component of effective action that Godfrey argues is crucial.

Senator Landon Pearson is known as the 'Senator for Children and Youth.' She is a colleague and has worked with Godfrey in the caucus group. Pearson comments: "I appreciate his energy and his conceptual mind. He is very bright and can make connections very well. That has been one of his assets in looking at the interactions between early childhood education and the programs that are necessary to put in place in order to establish a national strategy."

Senator Pearson affirms that Godfrey's work in this area has been indispensable: "His strength is his capacity to conceptualize and to strategize and that has helped to advance the issues. He makes sure that things are followed through. Without him, we would not have made the kind of progress that I think we have made as a government on these issues."

Godfrey also has personal experience in the area of early childhood development. When he was 51, he and his wife adopted a son, Ian, who is now 8 years old. He went through, at a more advanced age, what many parents go through when they are somewhat younger. Godfrey has learned first-hand the importance of providing children with the opportunities to develop their unique physical, emotional, intellectual and creative potential.

His message is clear: The focus on a specific goal, in-depth study on how to best achieve it, the development of a solid network of like-minded individuals and lots of perseverance are the ingredients to make a positive difference in the lives of those you wish to help. In other words, thinking locally and acting nationally is a powerful recipe which will benefit communities and, in particular, our children.

For eight years, **Senator Erminie Cohen** represented the interests of Canadians in the Senate of Canada, involving herself in issues of poverty, domestic violence, human rights, health and literacy. Now 75 years old and recently retired, Cohen explains that she never expected to become a Senator.

“I was 22 when I got married. I had three children, raised them and took care of my family,” Cohen comments. “Sure, I did a bit of community work – I went door-to-door, canvassing for the March of Dimes. But I have to say, my life really began when I was 51 years old.”

With her children all grown up, Cohen found that she began to do much more reading about women’s issues. Not sure what she could offer her community, she explains that she spent some time soul-searching and trying to determine exactly what her interests were. At the suggestion of a friend, she became involved with the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

Cohen points out: “I became very passionate about women’s issues and I wondered why more women weren’t becoming involved in the political process. I realized that, especially in the 1970s, women faced a very real glass ceiling. That’s when I decided that I wanted to help raise the profile of women in Saint John [New Brunswick].”

And she certainly didn’t waste any time. Cohen founded Saint John Women for Action, a group composed of a dozen women from various political backgrounds. It was important to Cohen that the women bring different views to the table and that they were not all associated with the same government party.

“I was looking for a sounding board, and I wanted us to be able to bounce ideas off of one another,” says Cohen. The group’s goal eventually was to implement initiatives that would make a difference in the everyday lives of women and girls. Cohen recognized the need for a solid group dynamic: “You can never be a hero by yourself. It’s through a symphony of efforts that goals are achieved,” she says wisely.

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Senator Erminie Cohen

The Senator is also a founding member of the board of Hestia House, a shelter for battered women and their children. Her involvement with the shelter stemmed from what Cohen calls a “cruel awakening.” As she began to work more closely on women’s issues, she began to see first-hand the terrible ramifications of domestic violence. “I got angry,” she admits. “And I think when you get angry, passions surface that you didn’t even know existed and you become extremely motivated and determined.”

Eileen Travis is the Regional Librarian for southwestern New Brunswick and was one of the co-founders of Hestia House along with Cohen. The two women have known each other for nearly 30 years. Eileen believes that two of Cohen’s greatest strengths are her reasoned, sensible nature and her keen awareness of the people around her. “One of the great things about Erminie is that her mouth is never in motion before her mind is in gear. There



Erminie Cohen on Parliament Hill.

aren't many people you can say that about," Eileen notes. "Erminie is admired by politicians everywhere regardless of their stripe," she adds.

In 1984, Cohen was asked to be a member of a group of women to advise Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. It was a wonderful experience which also allowed her to become involved in women's issues at the federal level. One realization that came from her work was simple: the needs and desires of women were the same across the country.

When she became a Senator in 1993, her focus shifted slightly to women's health. She held breakfasts on Parliament Hill where participants could learn about healthy living, and topics such as osteoporosis, schizophrenia and menopause were addressed. "The Senate is composed of one-third female Senators, and we take our jobs very seriously," Cohen explains. "We're there to raise issues, and health is an important issue to every woman."

But Cohen's work as a Senator was not limited to her work with women. She also became heavily involved in the problem of poverty after serving as the honorary chair of the first Atlantic Poor People's Conference held in Saint John in May 1996. "I was so impressed by the people I met at the conference," Cohen enthuses. "Their courage, their dignity and their collective voice – they wanted and needed to be heard. I was invited to the first day of the conference, but I ended up staying the whole weekend. I was blown away."

The Poor People's Conference highlighted the fact that individuals attending the conference felt the government was not doing enough – it should be giving back to the people. Cohen was so moved by the entire experience that she decided to become the voice of marginalized people on Parliament Hill.

"I realized that it had been nearly 25 years since a report had been written on the status of poverty in Canada," she comments. "So I hired a researcher. I wanted to write a book that was a simple read, something that people could understand." Cohen's book, *Sounding the Alarm: Poverty in Canada*, was published in February 1997 and is being used as a teaching text at various Canadian universities.

But Cohen didn't stop there. She also introduced legislation to add social condition as a prohibited area of discrimination under the *Canadian Human Rights Act* known as Bill S-11. "People living in poverty have been waiting for a general review of the Human Rights Act for nearly 10 years, and I wanted to do something. So I wrote the legislation [for Bill S-11] and I'd never done anything like that before. I had to defend it before a legal committee and I was very nervous. But

I believe that any future legislation should be considered in terms of how it affects people in poverty," Cohen argues. Bill S-11 was passed unanimously in the Senate in 1998 but was defeated in the House of Commons in 1999.

"It was when I began to be asked to speak on the issue of poverty that I knew I had made a difference: People had gained a respect and a new understanding for individuals living in poverty. I do think that one person can make a difference – especially if they're sincere. You can't be a glory-seeker, and you must persist even when the light at the end of the tunnel is only a flicker," Cohen explains.

So when the Senator was asked by Joe Clark to participate in a Task Force on Poverty in Canada, she eagerly accepted. The group took to the streets and met people who were living poverty. "It was a most revealing trip. We met panhandlers, patients in mental institutions, and people from every walk of life who had suffered injustices. Across Canada, from Newfoundland to British Columbia, the faces change, and the details change, but their stories are all basically the same." Cohen reveals what drives her to work on the poverty issue: "Poor people are all saying the same thing: 'You don't have to give us money, but just don't make us invisible. Acknowledge our humanity.' "

A former President of the National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO), Pamela Coates provides a testament to Cohen's effect on people living in poverty: "Erminie is a woman who has a lot of wonderful compassion and empathy for people in poverty. [She] has helped me to accept and to know how valued I am as a person and as a Canadian. She has shown me that it matters how I feel

and think especially because I am a poor person.” Pamela affirms that Cohen helped renew her faith in the federal government by helping her to understand the Senate’s commitment to justice and human rights for all Canadian citizens – even the impoverished ones.

Cohen has received numerous awards over the years including the Humanitarian Service Award 2000 from the Salvation Army. She also was honoured by the Jewish National Fund for contributions which “transcend political and communal affiliations.” She chose to dedicate the 1998 Negev Dinner campaign to the creation and planting of a forest in the Negev Desert called the New Brunswick Forest. Cohen was also awarded

an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of New Brunswick.

Having retired last summer, Cohen has many and varied plans that will keep her busy. Though she says she doesn’t know much about opera, she enjoys a challenge and has accepted the position of President of Opera New Brunswick. “It’s something new for me, and culture is very important,” she says. She also will serve as Co-Chair of the Domestic Violence Community Action Group in Saint John. The city’s community loan fund has also piqued Cohen’s interest. “I’m trying to learn to say ‘no,’ ” she laughs. “But I’m looking forward to working as a volunteer.” And her community is thrilled to have her.

John Amagoalik has 2 children, 5 grandchildren – and he fathered a province. It is a province for whose birth Amagoalik waited for more than a quarter century.

Known to many as the Father of Nunavut, John Amagoalik was one of the primary negotiators in a lengthy campaign for Native rights which resulted in the creation of the territory of Nunavut.

Nunavut – which means ‘our land’ in the Inuktitut language – comprises one-fifth of Canada and is home to approximately 28,000 inhabitants, 85 percent of whom are Inuit. Canada’s third territory was officially born in April 1999, but negotiations for its creation stem all the way back to 1974. At the time, Amagoalik was the Baffin Regional Information Officer for the government of the Northwest Territories. He received a call from a colleague at the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) asking him to become involved in a land claims settlement.

“I think it was in 1970 that the Alaska Land Claims Settlement was signed. It was then that I started becoming interested in land claims. And then, of course, there was the Calder Case in British Columbia in 1973 – that was the court case which determined that Aboriginal rights still existed in Canada. That case made me even more interested. So when I got that phone call from the ITC, I jumped at the chance to become involved,” John exclaims.

Amagoalik became the Executive Director of the Land Claims Project – the goal of which was to negotiate a land claims settlement and create a new territory in the Eastern Arctic.



John Amagoalik accepts a National Aboriginal Achievement Award for public service. Photo courtesy of Windspeaker, Canada’s National Aboriginal News Source.

The first step was to begin to educate the Canadian public about the Inuit community. John travelled across the country, visiting different cities and talking to the media, appearing in public forums and speaking in schools. And he did that for several years. He explains: “We had a lot of educating to do, because the Canadian public didn’t know very much about the Inuit people. We knew that was going to take time. As far as most ordinary Canadians were concerned, we were just another tribe of Indians. And we knew that in order for politicians to take us seriously, we had to have an understanding public.”

The Nunavut Claim faced many challenges: The claim was not a priority for the federal government in the 1970s, and land claims policies were very new to politicians. Amagoalik adds: “The government of the Northwest Territories was downright hostile to the idea of creating a new territory. And the federal government had never had to deal with negotiating self-governing institutions which had real constitutional and legal powers. The government didn’t even know how to react to some of the things we were asking for.”

Despite these hurdles, John Amagoalik was determined to see the Nunavut Claim through to the end. “Sure, we had to be very determined, but mostly we had to be very patient. We knew the process would take a lot of time, and we were in it for the long haul. But I don’t think anyone expected it to take almost 30 years,” he acknowledges.

As the years passed, John began to see politicians and governments change their attitudes as they began to understand the issues facing the Inuit community. The support of political leaders was key: At first, some leaders were not supportive of the land claim because they feared that it would mean creating political entities along ethnic lines. Inuit activists convinced them that this was not the case: The Inuit were asking for a public form of government where all citizens would have the same rights and responsibilities under Nunavut. Amagoalik notes: “When [political leaders] began to support the idea, the rest of the government seemed to fall into line behind them.”

Amagoalik points out that one of the most significant hurdles was to convince the residents of the Northwest Territories of the importance of a new territory. “From my perspective, the single most important thing was

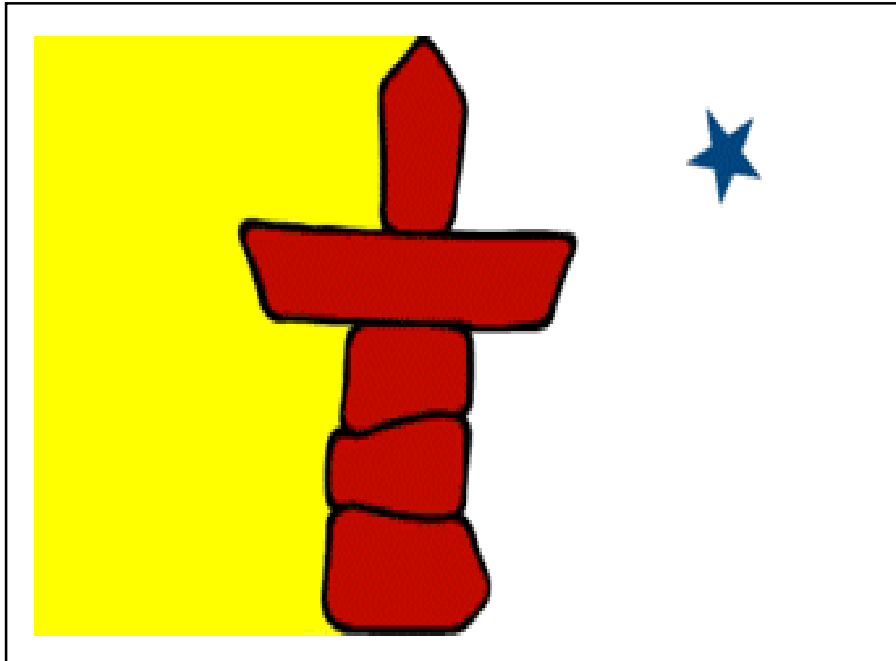
when we held the public plebiscite in 1982. We had to persuade all the people in the Northwest Territories that division was the right thing to do.” Voter turnout was very high and the overall result for the plebiscite was 56.5 percent for division. “It was our most important victory. After our communities demonstrated their very strong support for the project, we said to ourselves: ‘Nothing can stop us now.’” And nothing did stop them – though it took another 10 years for all interested parties to agree on a boundary line.

When the government of Nunavut was formed, Amagoalik advocated for a decentralized government with large numbers of managers located across the new territory. Now the government of Nunavut operates in a way unique from any other jurisdiction in Canada.

For example, there are no political parties. Members run as independents and the government operates on the basis of consensus, which means that laws are only passed once all members agree to the terms.

Nunavut incorporates Inuit values and traditions into a modern system of government. Inuit culture is promoted through the Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth which plays a key role in helping all departments develop and implement policies that are consistent with Inuit beliefs. Its working language is Inuktitut, but other languages used in the government are Inuinnaqtun, English and French.

As Chair of the Nunavut Implementation Commission, Amagoalik also supported the creation of the first legislative assembly that would guarantee an equal number of seats for men and women. The Commission’s ‘gender parity’ proposal was an attempt to elim-



The Nunavut flag.

inate systemic barriers to women’s participation in politics. The proposal was defeated in 1998.

Amagoalik has received international recognition for his efforts. Three years ago, French president Jacques Chirac conferred upon him a Knighthood: Amagoalik received the award of Knights of the Legion of Honour for the decades he spent working towards the creation of Nunavut. He was also presented with an honorary doctorate from St. Mary’s University in Halifax. In 1994, he was granted the National Aboriginal Achievement Award – an honour that is particularly special to him because, he says: “it came from my peers.” Amagoalik is humbled by these awards and is quick to point out that he was not alone – a team effort made the Nunavut Claim possible.

John Amagoalik is currently working in television as the Executive Producer of a news and public affairs program for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation in Iqaluit. He also writes a weekly column for the local newspaper called ‘My Little Corner of Canada.’ He’s a huge hockey fan, and in his spare time watches hockey on television with his grandchildren. “I was sent to a hospital in Edmonton back in 1963 because I was ill, and that was the first time I saw hockey on television. I saw the Maple Leafs play, and I’ve been a hockey nut ever since.”

Looking back on the past three decades of political work, Amagoalik affirms: “I feel very proud about what we’ve been able to accomplish. And I hope that Canadians can appreciate the contribution that we’ve made.”

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