

COOPER INSTITUTE ACTIVITIES REPORT 2008

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has responded to many community needs**



81 Prince St., Charlottetown, PE C1A 4R3

Tel (902) 894-4573 [(toll free (877))]

Fax 368-7180



cooperinstitute@eastlink.ca

www.cooperinstitute.ca

Major Programs, Support Work, and Issues

- ◆ PEI Working Group for a Livable Income
- ◆ Domestic Fair Trade for Food
- ◆ PEI Food Security Network
- ◆ PEI Public Transit Coalition
- ◆ Poverty Reduction Network
- ◆ Issues Workshops and Presentations
- ◆ Organizational Development and Support
- ◆ Window on the South
- ◆ Response to Requests for Resources
- ◆ Thanks, Welcome, Congratulations
- ◆ Funding
- ◆ Current Issues: Opinions

PEI Working Group for a Livable Income

The PEI Working Group for a Livable Income is now five-plus years old. It grew out of Cooper Institute's community workshops on Minimum Wage in 2002. The coalition of which Cooper Institute remains one of the co-ordinating organizations is made up of nine other community-based organizations: ALERT; PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women; PEI Federation of Labour; PEI People First; Société Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin (SSTA); Women's Network PEI; Actions Femmes de l'Î.-P.-É.; the PEI Healthy Eating Alliance; PEI Council of People with Disabilities; and Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

In 2008, the Working Group carried out its goal of community education involving the following: a presentation at MP Shawn Murphy's forum on poverty, co-presenting with MP Ken Dryden and PEI Minister of Social Service and Seniors, Doug Currie. The Working Group also presented to the Canadian Council of Social Development in Ottawa.

Education through media exposure was key to the work for the year. Letters and opinion pieces got coverage in the Guardian, Journal Pioneer, and La Voix Acadienne.

These included commentaries on: the need to have all interventions governed by guidelines based on the two feet of social justice and charity; the inappropriateness of the PEI Government's \$200,000 response to the worsening situation of impoverished families facing increases in fuel costs (a charity response); a challenge to see livable income and food as rights requiring changes in community attitude and public policy. The Working Group got some media exposure in a Guardian article on the Employment Standards Review, commenting on the intervention of the Chambers of Commerce in the proposed changes to the Employment Standards Act. CBC-TV and Radio covered the Working Group's response to the increase in the PEI minimum wage.

In the area of furthering dialogue with public policy makers, the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income had its most dismal year thus far. An invitation from the Premier in November, 2007 to meet with the Government caucus was not fulfilled, though the Working Group spent many hours preparing for the possibility. Also a promised meeting with Government's Strategic Planning Committee did not happen. However the Working Group made a presentation to the Governor General's Study Tour. During the Federal election household doorknob hangers with questions on poverty reduction addressed to candidates were prepared and distributed to a number of centres.

The PEI Working Group for a Livable Income is one of the founding members of the PEI Poverty Reduction Network.

Domestic Fair Trade for Food

Community Engagement in Developing Prospects for a System of Domestic Fair Trade for Food Products [A PEI PILOT] is designed as a two-year project intended to examine new possibilities for a system of Domestic Fair Trade (DFT) in food products in Canada. This was a National Farmers Union (NFU) project, implemented by Cooper Institute and partially funded by the ADAPT Council with a contribution from



Shirleen Peardon and Reg Phelan

Social Economy & Sustainability Research Network.

The first phase of the project involved research into domestic fair trade initiatives in North America, followed by community workshops and other presentations. Cooper Institute staff, interviewed various organizations already working on DFT or related initiatives. The research identified successes, obstacles, and strategies associated with establishing and maintaining Domestic Fair Trade as an ethic and practice. Mainly the research brings to light that there is a lively DFT movement in the United States and in Canada. Based on the DFT experience the research identified next steps for developing a DFT system as an achievable goal.

One of the "next steps" already part of the project was to engage Canadian and PEI groups in order to expand the findings of the research. At the NFU 39th Annual National Convention, the 250 delegates received a copy of the research report. Also Susan Fitzpatrick, Cooper Institute researcher, presented highlights of the research to the convention. Workshops in two PEI communities added important new insights for moving forward in DFT.

The future of the project includes creating a critical mass of people from diverse interests to learn about and promote Domestic Fair Trade in Food. This group would engage other citizens in developing strategic plans for strengthening the movement in Canada. It was clear from the various activities of the project that future work must include both production and distribution realities, including livable income for primary producers, healthy and eco-friendly production and distribution processes. Any plans for DFT requires networking and influencing policy work. They pre-suppose healthy community development and skills in program management. Current experience in Domestic Fair Trade in food indicates new sets of values need to be developed and put into practice.

PEI Public Transportation Coalition

The P.E.I. Public Transit Coalition brings together over two dozen community groups and industry organizations.

In June, Cooper Institute helped to organize public events - attended by over 125 people, including several MLA's, cabinet ministers and officials from various municipalities - in Kensington, Stratford and Montague to announce the results of a report, prepared by ENTRA Consultants, into the possibility of an Island-wide transit system.

Later in the year members of the Coalition met with the Minister of Communities, Cultural Affairs and Labour, Carolyn Bertram, and made a presentation to the Strategic Planning Committee. The group continues to advocate for public investment in an accessible, affordable system, based on sound principles and service standards.

Poverty Reduction Network

Following MP Shawn Murphy's Forum on Poverty in January 2008, Mr Murphy took the first step to bring together diverse Island groups with a declared concern about poverty. From the beginning those who met agreed to include the PEI Government, Federal representatives, local business, labour and community organizations and other interested individuals. These sectors met six times and became known as PEI Poverty Reduction Network (PRN), which is still in its formation stage. The new initiative was made up of representatives of: a federal MP; the provincial government; the Greater Charlottetown Chamber of Commerce; the PEI Council on the Status of Women; Cooper Institute; the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income; the Council for People with Disabilities; Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI; the Société Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin; the Latin American Mission Program, St. Vincent de Paul Society of Holy Redeemer Parish; newcomers' community; and students.

Cooper Institute's major task thus far in the PRN was to develop a three-year project proposal for engaging Islanders in dialogue and ongoing action to move forward on poverty reduction, with the hope of eventual poverty elimination. The group discussed and revised the proposal a number of times, but the project has not been activated. There is interest on the part of one foundation to participate in it, possibly by providing one-third of the funding required. The future of the Network is uncertain pending the re-appointment of a representative of the PEI Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy, which has gone through a number staff re-assignment challenges. The provincial government is a key component if the Network is to develop opportunities for cooperation among community, business, and governments.

Recession 2009

A Time of Loss: a Time for Hope

Canada has been through many recessions and knows how to come out of this one a much healthier country. The majority of the population knows the source of the current “downturn”. And the majority of Canadians knows that the most vulnerable must be protected from the fall out.

A word about the most obvious source. The same sectors which have smirked for decades at any suggestion that the system requires regulation, are now forced to admit that unbridled greed has led to a collapse. The very ones who have claimed that the free market has its own built-in regulator are admitting that their belief was unfounded. They have held that government should not interfere with the “natural” workings of the economic system. Now they are tripping over each other either to pump-in financial resources or to receive those same interventions. In the losers corner, these are the first losers. They have lost face whether they know it or not. Their ideology, their system, has failed them. Among them, of course are the CEOs and associates who have made off with hundreds of millions in outlandish salaries and bonuses.

On another level of loss: other sectors which could easily be lost in the jump-start-the-economy craze are primary producers: farmers, fishers, and foresters. For decades they suffered from public policies which attempted to cram them into an inappropriate advanced industrial model, even though their “capital” involves non-renewable resources. Governments often imply that farmers’ economic woes come from not keeping up with the market demands. Now all of a sudden “bail out” is a clean word because it is directed toward the industrial manufacturing sector, auto companies, which have definitely failed to keep up with the consumers’ demand for eco-friendly, efficient vehicles. No one wants auto workers to lose jobs. But just think of the number of jobs that are lost across Canada with the closure of each farm.

Other people who could lose out in this economic fiasco are investors. Not all these people can afford to “play” in the style of gamblers. A large percentage of the Canadian population, especially the elderly, who are depending on “safe” pension funds are now fearing the worst. Many others who were able to establish their own individual, modest pensions in the form of RRSPs are faced with a 30-40% decrease in their savings.

And then there are the generally ignored people whose income has typically been insufficient to meet their basic needs. Low-wage and unemployed workers, people living on social assistance and disability pensions can easily fall off the radar screen in a time of general economic crisis. The same is true of the elderly who receive only Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement. Talk about “tax cuts” for the middle class is not encouraging for people who are well below middle class.

Hidden in all the gloom and doom, there are strong messages of hope and challenge. An example of this is found in John Stapleton’s research on the four Canadian recessions which are (besides the Great Depression): the Recession of 1957-1958; the Oil Shock Recession of 1973-1975; the Structural Recession of 1981-83; and the Recession of 1990-1993. Stapleton makes the point that with the exception of the last recession in the early 90s, Canada’s government, and citizens not only rallied, but responded with imagination and courage, lobbying for, and instituting progressive social programs. He holds that the “sky is falling” theme which is the predominant tone at the beginning of the current recession is understandable. People are still “spooked” by the fall-out of the last recession. Governments after the last recession implemented drastic cuts to social programs from which the country has not yet recovered. ***It’s time to take the antidote to the ‘last recession spook’ and start calling for the real change and real improvement. After all, that’s what we accomplished in all of the last four downturns except the last one. Let’s get to work.*** (John Stapleton: ‘Last Recession Spook’ A Very Curable Disease, CCPA, April 2008)

Canadian Democracy A Learning Process

In the global arena, where so many countries lack the most basic political and human freedoms, Canadian spokespersons often speak with pride about being one of the best countries in the world in which to live. Traditionally, there is a general perception, internally and externally, that because Canada is formally a democratic country, then democracy must be alive and well here.

The marks of formal democracy, free elections, freedom of speech and other individual rights are of course held in high esteem. No one would want these lessened. However, it is becoming more and more clear that formal democracy does little to maintain the "of the people, for the people, and by the people" venture.

Citizens over the years have entrusted to governments and their agencies the role of "keepers of democracy", rarely acknowledging that the designated "keeper" concept is incompatible with democracy itself. True democracy, which is dynamic, cannot be kept; it must be continually created and re-created. This requires that all of the people be vigilant, critical and active all of the time.

And so what might happen when the people wake up and find that they have left the "foxes in charge of the chicken coop"? What might happen when the people become aware that they have a government of the rich and powerful, for the rich and powerful, and by the rich and powerful, a mere handful of privileged citizens? What might happen if people in many community groups were to take a critical stance to examine their own expectations of democracy? What might happen when people begin to see full enlightened participation as the cornerstone of democratic processes? What might happen when people find out that successive governments have done close-to-irreversible damage to the country's democratic institutions and to its sovereignty?

Many people, who come to the realization that they have lost (or never had) control, respond with an immobilizing, self-defeating cynicism. They recount the numbers of times that governments have "consulted" and then went on with their own unaltered agendas, regardless of what the people say. They talk unfairly of government corruption as though every single person in public office were a scoundrel. They talk of how governments and political parties are more interested in their own power than in discovering ways to encourage a healthy, grassroots democratic involvement. Governments must be held responsible when people feel powerless, especially if those governments do not tolerate dissent.

Governments and political parties are responsible for the disillusion that their undemocratic actions has spawned. They are also responsible for the woeful example of democracy they model in legislative assemblies and the House of Commons. For the most part, people who promote peace are turned off by the violent words and actions displayed by legislators. One-upmanship is outmoded. Why in the 21st Century, are governments maintaining that cooperation cannot work? There are even many examples in the world of successful, people-serving minority governments. New generations, and many in the older set, are looking for ways to work together for the good of all. Are governments and politicians being encouraged by dinosaurs in their parties to exercise closed-mindedness and a boorish style?

What can governments and political parties do to advance Canadian democracy?

- ❖ Curb the ideological mind-set (check President Obama's Inauguration speech)
- ❖ Develop a new language and practice of cooperation and civility
- ❖ Place the needs of the most impoverished as the highest priority in governing
- ❖ Provide resources to low income people. Their poverty excludes them from democratic processes
- ❖ Financially support and respect the work of community-based organizations.

