
Communitarianism: A Legislator's Perspective

by Pat Lorjé, MLA

Communitarianism is a modern social movement consisting of individuals and organizations who have come together to promote the view that individual liberties depend upon bolstering the foundations of civil society: community consensus on social and moral values; emphasis on the responsibilities of citizenship; and a focus on the community rather than on individuals or the state. Communitarianism is a non sectarian, and non partisan movement which held a Forum on February 16, 1996. Speakers included Professors Amitai Etzioni and Charles Taylor, Father Bill Ryan, Andrew Coyne and Pat Lorjé. The Forum was held on Parliament Hill through the co-operation of the Deputy Speaker, David Kilgour. In this article the author examines some of the new and creative approaches found in Communitarianism and offers some cautionary and practical notes.

In the excitement of embracing a "new movement", we must not forget a basic truth embodied in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. Parents will recognize this cautionary tale of a curious and deep friendship between Wilbur, the very innocent pig, and Charlotte, the very wise spider. One line speaks to me and my ilk: "Wilbur ran again to the top of the manure pile, full of energy and hope."

My re-election to a once honourable profession makes me keenly aware of the need to mix idealism and practicality as we trumpet the New Jerusalem. We need whisker-sharp antennae to know how far, and how fast to implement our ideas. If we are too far ahead of people, we lose. If we are too far behind, we atrophy. So, like



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Wilbur, politicians constantly run to the top of the manure pile, full of energy and hope.

Indeed, many communitarian ideas certainly fill me with energy and hope that the partisan debate can be transformed to a discourse on effective improvements. Nevertheless, I have been around the political game long enough to be wary of the shifting nature of the pile where I stand. Our modern task, to move the public agenda from the central level to the community level, will be most effectively accomplished if we engage the public in dialogue and action on the important and compelling notion of stewardship, the balance between citizens' rights and responsibilities. Simultaneously, the discussion needs to move beyond individuals and also focus on the duties and obligations of our systems in this objective. This means we need to be acutely aware of some of the practical problems associated with devolving power and enhancing and enriching communities.

Although ideals and ideology are the elemental soul of politics, beliefs must be balanced with practicality.

It is wonderful, as we move beyond an international duel of command versus market economies, to come across fresh ideas that shift our thinking into completely new directions. My only caveat to the lure of communitarianism is one expected from an unapologetic social democrat: this movement, to succeed at all, must not rely simply upon attitudinal change. Economic change is equally important. Otherwise communitarianism will be seen as mere middle-class moralizing, and pompous rhetoric from those who already have their oar for the lifeboat. Enlightened self-interest is a tacky excuse for a social movement.

Governments today come in two forms - maintenance, or change. The former simply props up the status quo of the privileged. This leads to bitterness, cynicism, and disdain for the political process. The logical consequence is demands for direct democracy (which surely is the most easily manipulable tool of all) and government by referendum. In Saskatchewan, we try to buck the trend, and be a government of change - by design not default. It is not easy. Our key job is to involve people in a meaningful communal fashion, and to make sure that the politicians stay out of the way as much as possible.

These strategic changes aim to ensure that everyone feels a sense of stake. Citizens cannot be meaningfully engaged in change, or even in the day-to-day maintenance of systems unless they feel a sense of urgency and involvement. Who cares about their country's economic or moral health if they do not feel a

sense of belonging, of stake? It is not only the direct owners or shareholders of economic assets who have a legitimate interest in how those assets are used. For example, the weekly transfer of electronic funds equal to or greater than the 4 trillion dollar American debt is something that effects all of us directly.

It is too easy to get caught up in day-to-day political crises and titillations. We then tend to forget the larger context. Issues like the continued drift and anomie of our citizens. Issues like simplistic calls for boot camps and long gun registration to combat violence. Issues like work-for-welfare against a back-drop of tax write-off business lunches. What about the children born into poverty and despair, who have no voice? Or those who have no ears because of the clack-clack-clack of manufactured crises?

Debate about future approaches in Canadian politics has to acknowledge current economic realities for Canadians. Skipping the easy rhetoric about concentration of money, I will simply focus on two inescapable realities. First, reported recently in the *Globe and Mail*, the average earned cash income of poor Canadians was only \$925 per year. That is all they garnered from our chest-thumping "World Number One" position. \$925! Of course, that is not what they actually received. Thanks to our shrinking social safety net, poor Canadians eked out a First World income with Third World earnings. Whew! Saved from international shame by programs that some consider frills.

The second urgent fact balances the first. Over the past few years, while provincial governments tackled their deficits, and the federal government belatedly joined the parade, middle income Canadians saw their standards of living decline. Not theoretically. Actually. Even though it is a pretty remarkable standard from which we are declining, the cold shower reality is that this trend creates a sense of entrenchment and mean-spiritedness in middle Canadians. We used to band together to battle the problems of poverty. Seduced by affluence, we have overconsumed and under-invested. Now our children's future is squandered and we blame the underclass who have been treading water or sinking all these past years.

This issue needs attention. But not with political parties callously appealing to the worst in people. The challenge for everyone on the political spectrum who believes in the timeless values of citizenship and stewardship is to discover ways to appeal to the best in people. That is the beauty of communitarianism. It offers a map out of the maze of viciousness.

Saskatchewan has started with some practical approaches to communitarianism. We began with an analysis of where and how the traditional political process has gone wrong, and shut out the "citizens". For

example, although Canadians have made tremendous advances in our quest to eradicate poverty, we have merely kissed the wounds. We have not healed the sores. Similarly, universal health care has become debased to mean hospital construction and local jobs.

We can do better. The means will be different. But for politics to work, our principles and values have to remain timeless. Tactics change. Morals and values do not.

Back in the "good old days" of an expanding economy, we believed anything was possible. Trudeau told us we could solve any problem if we tossed around enough money. In my party we felt if only we had enough strong state institutions everything would be fine. The result? People looked outwards to the state for salvation. They stopped looking inwards to their own communities. And, quite honestly, we never did successfully bridge that gap between state and community. Our task now is to redefine interventionism. We need to move it away from statism, to where it should be - the community.

It is a critical time in Canada - time to stop talking and theorizing. Discourse must lead to doing. In this respect, I am immensely privileged. I am part of a million people in a province actually doing something to create consensus to enrich and strengthen our communities. The debate has moved from blue print state socialism or chaotic individualism to a more meaningful level where people feel excited and involved. Saskatchewan is working, reasonably effectively, to refocus the public agenda on the interests of the community at large, instead of individual agendas or particularistic groups.

We do things slightly differently in Saskatchewan. We were the first province in Canada to balance its budget in the past decade. In four short years, we progressed from a province with the highest per capita deficit to one with a small surplus. We did this without cutting back our social safety net spending, and without major riots or demonstrations. Indeed, the one major demonstration we had - 10,000 angry farmers protesting changes to trim support payments - turned out to be the pivotal defining moment for a more communitarian orientation in the province.

Part of the reason we have accomplished positive change is that we have, with some success, moved the debate away from the time-honoured notions of Left and Right. These labels have become extremely tedious. Not the least because the media consistently and willfully use the wrong labels, the wrong definitions, and the wrong words.

For example, when an NDP government announces, as we did recently, that we will overhaul a welfare system that has grown like Topsy, and never been reviewed for its efficacy and efficiency, we are denounced by the media as moving to the Right. This in spite of the fact that

we are categorically NOT proposing Work for Welfare. We propose real cash and benefit incentives for people to move off welfare - supplements to the working poor, and the first tiny steps towards a Guaranteed Annual Income for children. This is not right-wing, no matter what the media says.

In fact, Left and Right have become short-hand for Us versus Them. That is a fluid debate, and one well worth enjoining. But not with hackneyed labels, please. I am an unrepentant social democrat. I would prefer slightly more accurate colours hoist on the mast. How about Pluralistic and Inclusive versus the Old Establishment? Or Public and Democratic Power versus Private or Transnational Power? How about Community and Moral Values versus Subjective Self-Indulgences?

That is where the notion of communitarianism becomes very helpful. The reality is many politicians, and much of the electorate have moved past the old words and labels. Granted, we can still goose-step to the old tunes. Frankly though, most people are looking for action-oriented approaches, rather than meaningless thought-stopping labels.

I want this polemic to be more than a Saskatchewan commercial. Nevertheless, some of the ways that we have devolved power and worked to strengthen communities can be instructive. I will simply touch the high points. A more detailed exposé of the modern strategies we have used to create a more communitarian sense of connectedness in the province is beyond the scope of this current presentation.

The Saskatchewan way has been to work incrementally, bit by bit, sector by sector. Not the whole society at once. We strategically targeted areas that have naturally, like cream, floated to the top. In our first term, we tackled health care reform - a sacred cow that we barbecued with mixed compliments to the Chef. Despite the changes, people stuck around for "seconds". We also took steps to reverse the nonsense of job creation through sexy mega-projects funded by government largesse. We belled the cat that both the right and the left purr about - the quixotic notion that job creation is a government responsibility. We set up regional economic development authorities. The goal is not mere profit. It is community enhancement and inter-community cooperation.

It is working. Now we are turning our attention to reform of governance structures, educational institutions, and the social welfare system. We are also developing a creative, meaningful budget consultation process, using multi-media, town hall meetings, 1-800 lines and interactive questionnaires.

Saskatchewan people are intensely politically literate and astute. And the New Democrats in my province have

twice tasted the bitter bile of defeat, so we tend to be politically patient. Lofty though the goals of communitarianism are, you do not change the beast all at once. That is a great recipe for a fallen soufflé, as Bob Rae recently discovered. Rather, we work slowly, leading at the following edge of the community, or vice versa, to involve and engage communities. The radical alternative either is quickly voted out of power in a democracy such as ours, or is strangled inexorably, like the former USSR. So we instill the idea of collectivism, of community, of cooperation, slowly.

How do we do this? We have aimed for greater participation in community decision-making and we increased the flexibility of communities to deliver services to meet local needs. Most importantly, we work to provide communities with support, skills and needed legitimacy as we devolve power. Participation, flexibility and tolerance, as well as acknowledged authority are essential pre-conditions if communities are to evolve into real centres of stewardship. It is essential to activate communities emotionally to get them going.

Change does not come about unless people feel a real sense of pride in their community and their ability to change things.

Obviously, this means the focus is the caring aspects of the community, and a commitment to move things away from distant bureaucrats. That has meant cutting across government departmental lines, as we did with our Children's Action Plan, or implementing bold ideas that turn the problem upside down – such as our *Victims of Domestic Violence Act* (it allows the women and children to stay home, and the men to seek shelter!). Government is important, but it can not, and should not, do everything for everyone. The problem with the structure of government is not solely the expense. Too often, it simply is not producing the results. Sometimes it is best for people to do it themselves.

However, though I do believe that we on the left often tend to confuse the strategies of the 60's with the workable means of the 90's, I do not renounce my basic belief in the power of all of us – government and community in harmony – to achieve greatness and dreams. Traditional leftist interventionism has run its course, but traditional leftist thought has not. Our principles and goals are even more relevant today. Indeed, the very core of communitarianism is the tap root of social democratic thought-caring, community, social and economic justice. These values guide us as we

consider how to generate wealth and rights, how to distribute wealth and responsibilities.

Because, whether the proponents of that mythical free market acknowledge it or not, the marketplace knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing. Left may be meeting Right, but it is for a handshake, not a love affair.

Traditional community structures – church, club and coffee-klatch- are all breaking down or becoming more irrelevant and impotent. That does not mean though that we should simply despair and retreat into individual cocoons of counterfeit cyber-communities. Breakdown of traditional structures has happened before in the past – imagine the serfs and peasants bemoaning the loss of the power of the court! New structures arose because of, or in spite of Cromwell. A move towards homeostasis is an historical inevitability.

But the canvas of the new order has not yet been completely painted. There is still time to look critically at the nature of the new emerging structures. There is time to insist that they, as well as individuals, balance rights and responsibilities. It is too easy to blame the little guy when we shift our focus to duties and obligations. But what about the biggies?

What about the media? Television, for instance, can actually be used to encourage thought. Why do we let them get away with pure entertainment shlock? Let us applaud, as we clearly did recently, when it dares to present a moral message of the human condition. I am referring here to *Gulliver's Travels*. Simultaneously, let us encourage more informed civil discourse on the tiny screen.

Similarly, businesses have successfully convinced government to shift taxation from corporations to individuals. The freed-up profits, they claimed, would generate new opportunities for communities – not for the investment community, but for the consuming community. Let us put their feet to the fire, so they will follow through on their commitments.

One more example of a necessary focus-shift: for all the sloppy political thinkers, just exactly what is meant when a committed free-enterpriser nags a government like mine and complains that we have not created enough jobs? The notion that the saviours of our economy are Big Government, Big Business and Big Labour, should be put to rest. Governments properly ought to facilitate job creation. However, except for genuine state ownership in the form of Crown Corporations for public services, and the rare kick-start investment, they really ought to stay very, very far away from direct job creation. Politicians on the right ought to stop demanding that governments on the left create more jobs.

One final point needs to be made. Communitarianism is in danger of being very Eurocentric. When we talk about common sense and values, what about the "Elders"? What about the Indian and Metis communities? Many of them are a lot closer to the ideals of communitarianism than the dominant society. But they are never acknowledged and mentioned. These communities have something important to teach us.

It is not easy for anyone, particularly politicians, to give up power. We thrive on it. We need it like a drug. But if we truly care about our Canadian society, and want to ensure that it does not descend into a disparate collection of rugged McCities, or roving tribes, we need to listen to our communities, walk our talk, and devolve our

precious control structures. It is dangerous. It is risky. And it is exhilarating. But as John McBride (author of *The Careless Society*) said so well: "*There are incredible possibilities if we are willing to fail to be gods.*"

We have so much to learn from citizens. They were the ones who first blew the whistle on the political shill game of picking one pocket to stuff the other. They were the ones who said enough to rotten-borough political construction of highways and hospitals. They are the ones with the common sense. Let us learn from them.

Sure, there will be contradictions and conflict along the way. But a truly strong democracy, the kind Canada prides itself on, will survive, thrive, and prosper when it truly involves its community.
