

Inclusive Society = Just Society

Hello,

I would like to thank my colleague, Ms. Elizabeth Sumbu and her staff at CANSA and members of the planning committee, for the invitation to be with you this evening to help you celebrate your theme “Specialized Excellence, a required quality service in Nova Scotia”.

I am privileged to have worked in Cumberland County for 9 years and during that time to have had an affiliation with CANSA. Though it is not without some controversy, I have been pleased to see its mandate expand from an organization focused almost exclusively on the interests and concerns of ANS’s, to include specialization in the delivery of employment and other services to youth and persons with disabilities (PWD) and now generalized services to all persons of Cumberland County.

As I looked over the list of the ten member organizations of the Collaborative Partnership Network Agencies, I can imagine that each of you have had similar organizational histories. Some I can imagine were formal agencies that took on the role of serving PWD; others were small community support agencies for PWD that grew to take on the role of providing specialized employment services to PWD. Whatever your origins, I would like to welcome and congratulate you. As is the role of the supper speaker I hope to inspire and encourage you in your work. So I’ve crafted a message for you that I’ve entitled
“Inclusive Society = Just Society.”

Perhaps because of the times in which I was born as much as to my personal ideologies, I consider myself to have been a Trudeau Liberal. I was too young to get caught up in Trudeaumania but his driving passion to create what he called a “Just Society” appealed to me as a young black man that was just coming into his own. I should hasten to point out today that there is hardly a legitimate politician of any stripe who would disagree with the effort to continue with the vision of Canada as a just society.

We should remember that the issues of the day were really about language. Canada was a divided nation. English and French; each existing in their separate worlds. So much so that the phrase “Two Solitudes”, the title of the famous Mac Lennan novel, was adopted to describe the national condition.

In the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s this war was so intense that it threatened to rip this country apart. In large part Trudeau’s assertion of this “Just Society” was an attempt to promote respect for the rights of these two peoples. The belief was that respect for the rights of each would lead to peace, peace to unity and unity to prosperity for all. In Canada the push for this inclusive vision as a place where two different peoples could live in peace was the foundation for a more expansive and inclusive vision for Canada.

The quest for a Just Society was not just a pretty vision. It was not just an idea. It was followed by a National Official Bilingualism policy, a national multiculturalism policy, and the development of programs and agencies that had the official duty to implement these policies: Federal funding for French instruction in English areas and English instruction in French areas; national and provincial heritage departments that promote cultural programming and exchange. The CBC, the CRTC all of these institutions it can be argued, were born out of the need to promote the just/inclusive society that Canada was aiming to be. In time we have seen French and English tension begin to fade. So much so that Lt Governor Michael Jean declared in her inaugural speech that “the time of the two solitudes is past.” Jean herself an immigrant Canadian of Haitian/African origins seemed an appropriate model to voice this statement. My point is just this, the just society is an inclusive society and the nation’s greatest institutions acknowledge that.

Now the specific question can be asked here. Are the rights of PWD acknowledged within the national movement to create the Just Society? I would hazard to say yes, but not until recently, but I’d also warn that the gains that have been made are currently under attack.

We should remember that Canada was the first nation to include the rights of persons with disabilities within its constitution in section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Though it came later, the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 changed fundamentally the way people in North America began to think about disability. Prior to this we measured disability by degrees of impairment. It was purely medical. After 1990, instead of focusing on disability measures, we began as a culture to measure accessibility as a function of society. This marked a radical and essential shift. Building codes changed, sidewalks changed, public transportation changed where it existed at all and the expectation that a PWD would be out and about in society slowly became the norm.

Similarly, but more slowly, the work place has become an arena where the expectation is that PWD will experience inclusion. The existence of the Collaborative Partnership Network is evidence of this expectation. Governments Federal and Provincial have invested in the development of specialized employment services to PWD. As a result of this and some favorable tax and regulatory programs aimed at supporting employers to be more inclusive in their hiring practices PWD are significantly more likely to be in the workforce now than they were 20 or 30 years ago when their issues first got on the Just Society agenda. Yet it seems that the progress has stalled. Despite the gains, PWD are only half as likely to be employed as their typically able counterparts. Yet they are 3 and 4 times more likely to be absolutely unemployed. But sadly, the movement towards the Just Society is not just stalled; it seems to be under attack. I suspect that the theme of your conference “Specialized Excellence: A Required Quality Service in Nova Scotia” is a clue to this fact. You, like every other institution and service designed to support the creation and maintenance of our Just Society are under attack.

The CBC, CRTC, Environmental Regulatory bodies designed to protect the national common wealth, multiculturalism, arts organizations that are critical to exploring Canadian identity all in recent years have been under threat of fiscal restraint. I could go on at length to talk about why this is the case but I’m afraid I’ve used most of the time allotted to me, instead let me suggest the way forward, some simple ideas.

First be true to you name as an association: In this climate of fiscal restraint organizations under siege cannot attempt to stand alone. You must work together and with like-minded organizations to give voice to this broad entrenchment that is happening to our society. The occupy movement

fell, in part, because of its inability to broaden beyond its over educated, underemployed, middle class, white constituency. Notable in the visuals of the movement was the lack of Black faces. Collaborations and partnerships are essential to any progressive movement today.

2. Reject the premises of the fiscal restraint ideology: Canada still and ever will be one of the wealthiest nations on the planet. A regulatory and tax environment that promotes a just and inclusive society is the key to future wealth generation and national wellness. Proof of this fact is the health and strength of Canada's banks. CIBC was just announced to be the strongest financial institution in the country and the 3rd strongest in the world. Why? Were Canadian bankers smarter than all other bankers on the planet? No. the Canadian regulatory system that kept financial institutions discreet and separate and the regulatory regime that disallowed rapid wealth creation through artificially inflated economic activities kept us safe. It was government intervention that protected Canadian wealth. And government should not be shy to redistribute that wealth in a way that supports the justice society project.

3. Insist that the work you do not be judged solely by economic measures. The specialized work of providing employment services to PWD is an essential part of the Just Society project. It's a question of Human Rights and Justice. Until greater equality is attained, any act to undermine the progress of inclusion of PWD in the workplace is a contravention of Section 15 of the Charter. Opposing voices to this idea should kindly be asked to give this argument to a federal judge of appropriate jurisdiction.

So those are my three points. Perhaps I took too long to get to them, but I hope the journey was enjoyable.

Again, thank you for this invitation to be here. I wish you well in the remainder of your conference.