

The Wind that Shakes the Barley

I picked this title for my talk, I think, just the day after I saw the Ken Loach film by the same name at the Toronto International Film Festival. The film presents the complexities of Ireland's struggle for independence as it tells the story of the lead-up to the Irish Civil War of 1922 through the life stories of ordinary people, in particular two brothers.

It may seem like an odd title for a speech about housing and homelessness.

Loach borrowed the title from an 18th Century Irish ballad, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, by Robert Dwyer Joyce.

*“The mountain glen I’ll
seek at morning early
And join the bold united
men, while soft winds
shake the barley.”*

The ballad tells the story of a doomed young Wexford rebel who is about to plunge into the violence of the 1798 Irish rebellion. The reference to barley derives from the fact that the rebels often carried barley oats in their pockets as provisions for when they were on the march. This gave rise to the post-rebellion phenomenon of barley growing and marking the “crotty-holes”, mass unmarked graves that the rebels were thrown into, symbolizing the regenerative nature of Irish resistance to British rule.

Winds of Social Change

Beric German, my friend and colleague in Toronto, is one of the best community organizers I know. We have worked on many homeless issues together - inhumane shelter conditions, tuberculosis and disease outbreaks, homeless deaths, and Tent City - the largest and longest act of civil disobedience by homeless people in Canada since the Depression.

Beric describes the *wind* we need to create to make things happen. The wind that is necessary for the mobilization of people - for social change. The *wind* has to stir people, it has to energize and warm people, it has to compel people to gather, to be vocal, to insist and to fight for what is right.

You could say that in the past the *wind* led to:

- Suffrage - in 1916 women in Manitoba got the right to vote, followed in other provinces.
- The defeat of Nazism

- Roe versus Wade and reproductive rights, gains made through the work of people like Margaret Sanger, Carolyn Egan, Judy Rebick and Henry Morgentaler.
- The end to British colonial rule (1940s), led by Mahatma Gandhi based on non-violence.
- The overthrow of terrible dictatorships in developing countries like Cuba (1959) and Nicaragua (1979).
- The end to the Vietnam War.
- The end to apartheid in South Africa through the work of people like Mandela, Biko, Tutu.
- Economic rights: to organize trade unions, a shorter work week, a minimum wage, the right to social insurance, welfare, health care.
- Human rights: almost world-wide acceptance that racism is wrong, homophobia is wrong.

In many cases, structures were founded, policies changed and socialists were elected. For example:

The election of Jimmy Simpson as mayor of Toronto in 1935 - the first socialist mayor of a major city in North America; the election of the Douglas CCF government in Saskatchewan in 1944 – the first socialist government in North America; the founding of the United Nations and the formation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights in 1966; amendments to the National Housing Act in Canada in 1973 which ensured the funding of about half a million co-op and non-profit homes over the next 20 years and; last but not least, the founding of the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and the launch of the 1% solution which named homelessness a disaster and seeded a national campaign for a national housing programme.

The wind carrying these initiatives forward were huge movements of people that believed and fought and in some cases suffered great hardships, over a period of decades while fighting for the wins that we all benefit from now.

It's really important to review these wins periodically.

Planting the Seeds

David Walsh, a long-time social justice activist who helped found the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee says that:

“The victories of Gandhi (showing non-violence works), Martin Luther King (civil rights), and the prophetic work of Archbishop Romero (Latin American justice)...sometimes these victories are more like planted seeds that will yield greater victories in future years.”

Certainly Helen Caldicott planted a seed that grew into a world-wide anti-nuclear movement that, as recent events have made clear, still has an important role to play today.

I saw *If You Love This Planet* and have to say that personally, Caldicott was a major influence on the direction of my career, leading me to form a nurses group in the 1980s – Nurses for Social Responsibility, that would oppose nuclear weapons and go beyond that mandate to address other justice issues such as access to health care, apartheid, homelessness and poverty. Caldicott’s message was that we all *could* and *should* have a role to play as health care workers, in justice and peace.

As Rosalie Bertell says “*We’re all downwind from Chernobyl.*” I believe you can take that phrase literally and metaphorically and apply it to many, many issues ranging from discrimination to housing.

Homelessness in Canada

Homelessness is our struggle today. Homelessness or being ‘de-housed’ is what is downwind from poverty, it is what is downwind for ordinary people, from St. John’s to Halifax to Montreal, to Gatineau, to Ottawa, to Kingston, to Belleville, to Cobourg, to Peterborough, to Oshawa, to York Region, to Toronto, to Guelph, to Hamilton, to Windsor, to Sarnia-Lambton, to London, to Sudbury, to Thunder Bay, to Winnipeg, to Edmonton, to Vancouver, to Victoria. These are the places where I have visited and I have seen it.

In 1998, we formed the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and we declared Homelessness a National Disaster. With that declaration, we called for two things:

First, that ***federal emergency relief monies*** be released to communities across the country so they could provide disaster relief for their rapidly growing homeless populations. This type of effort is what should have happened in the Gulf coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Second, we called for a long-term solution, the ***1% solution – a National Housing Programme***, where all levels of government would spend an additional 1% of their budgets to build affordable housing. The 1% solution originates from research done by Professor David Hulchanski, who determined that when our federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments were allocating money towards building social housing, they were spending on average 1% of their budgets.

The first item we called for – the federal emergency relief monies, essentially occurred. Homelessness in Canada was catapulted on the national and international scene and shamed by UN condemnations of Canada’s record on homelessness. In 1999, Prime Minister Chrétien appointed Claudette Bradshaw as our first ever **Minister Responsible for Homelessness**. In 2000, ‘SCPI’ (Supporting Community Partnerships Initiatives) monies were rolled out across the country - hundreds of millions of dollars! The hundreds of millions of SCPI dollars, or as I like to call them ***‘disaster relief monies’*** have funded new shelter beds, renovations to drop-ins, shelters and food banks, programs that target homeless youth, identification replacement programs, even some transitional

housing. But, as my long-time friend and colleague, housing activist Michael Shapcott always says, “people were made more comfortable in their state of homelessness but at the end of the day were still essentially homeless.”

Isn't housing a human right?

Michael Wilson didn't seem to think so when, as finance minister through most of the Mulroney Conservative government, he presided over about \$1.8 billion in cuts to housing programs.

Don Mazankowski, the last finance minister in the previous Conservative government didn't think so, when he presided over the decision to suspend funding for new social housing.

Paul Martin didn't think so, when as finance minister he made massive cuts in health and social spending and announced the downloading of national housing programs in the 1996 budget – which left Canada as one of the only countries in the world without a national housing program. He didn't think so when he led the commercialization of Canada Mortgage and Housing in 1998, which included changes to the National Housing Act, eroding the ability of CMHC to deal with the housing crisis.

Several months after we declared homelessness a national disaster, Prime Minister Jean Chretien appointed ***Claudette Bradshaw*** as Minister Responsible for Homelessness. This was a first - Canada had the distinction of having a Minister Responsible for Homelessness but not a Minister with full responsibility for housing.

In fact, we've had many Ministers with housing responsibilities, but it would appear that none of them thought their role included the building of housing.

There was ***Minister Diane Marleau, Minister Alfonso Gagliano, Minister David Collette, Minister Steve Mahoney, Minister John McCallum, Minister Joe Fontana and today's Minister Diane Finlay.***

Isn't housing a human right, even in Canada?

James Flaherty, the current finance minister doesn't seem to think so. He appears poised to kill all federal homelessness funding, complete the privatization of CMHC, and end all federal housing funding following the roll-out of the C-48 housing dollars in two years time.

South African activist Steven Biko said:

“The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”

I don't think that in the minds of Canadians, we really believe yet that all of our people have a right to housing, and that is a problem. How else to explain the Canadian NGO's 2005 submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Working Group, that reported Canada has:

“no coherent policy of national standards to ensure that the right to adequate housing is enjoyed by all and particularly by poor and disadvantaged groups, such as low-income women.”

This year, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights named Canada's Human Rights violations. Here is just one of them:

#62. The Committee reiterates its recommendation that the federal, provincial, and territorial governments address homelessness and inadequate housing as a national emergency...and implement a national strategy for the reduction of homelessness that includes measurable goals and timetables, consultation and collaboration with affected communities.

So, what does happen when we don't believe in and we don't fund the right to housing in Canada?

- overcrowded shelters and conditions that are not meant for long-term living, including some, which do not even meet the UN Standard for Refugee camps;
- outdoor sleeping that ranges from cardboard and tarpaulin to sleeping bags, to living in cars and vans;
- new funding rules that prohibit agencies from delivering survival supplies to people outside, and an increased intolerance for people sleeping outdoors;
- an institutional charity response that today puts homeless people at risk by creating congregate sleeping in church basements and forced nightly movement;
- the unhealthy shelter conditions that leave people vulnerable to bedbugs...to tuberculosis...to emerging viruses like Norwalk or SARS...;
- growth of outdoor encampments, squats and tent city 'communities';
- growing family homelessness and a dire shortage of shelters for families with children nationwide;
- crummy motels that municipalities are increasingly forced to use for emergency shelter for families with children because they don't have enough shelter space and they won't create spaces;
- laws against homelessness such as Toronto's City Hall by-law criminalizing homeless people sleeping on the square, and the forced evictions of homeless people nation-wide;
- unnecessary and easily preventable deaths;

- the growth of hate, hate crimes and discrimination targeted towards homeless people, particularly those with mental health or substance use histories.

Given these horrific circumstances and outcomes, the fight we face now, is like the fight for Medicare. ***The fight for housing is another stage in the fight for health care.***

Can a person who is crowded into unhealthy conditions, crowded into shelters, or crowded into uncared for apartments and rooming houses, or put into the streets – can that person be healthy, stay healthy, even survive?

Is our best response the winter based emergency programmes that provide mass sleeping space for thousands across the country and then close their doors in the spring?

Can we only dream up a plan to copy the New York model that counts, chases, evicts and harasses people off the street?

Until we see housing as a right, a human right, that is all we will get.

We need a fully funded national housing programme ***for everyone***, so that no one in this country remains homeless.

We need a wind.