

Working toward a sustainable future for Canada

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Canada has committed itself to sustainable development. At the World Summit for Sustainable Development, September 2002, we ratified the Kyoto Protocol, committed to having a plan in place by 2005 and to working with the rest of the world to halve the numbers in the world who are living in poverty and without clean water.

Over a year later, we are, as a country, considering ways and means to meet our commitments under the Kyoto Protocol. We have taken some actions and discussing others. We have taken steps to reduce our ecological footprint on the planet and to reduce the amount of energy we use.

Some city dwellers have given up their cars and have found the skies have not fallen. Our discussions include the need for increased resources to support public transit and renewable energy, mechanisms to reduce and monitor greenhouse gas emissions, further reduce pollution, protect our water, and support urban renewal.

These are all positive steps, but we cannot stop there. As well, Canada needs to address a growing crisis here at home - the increasing gap between rich and poor. We need to address the homelessness issue, the numbers of children living in poverty, the numbers of people who do not have adequate food, clothing and shelter in this one of the richest countries in the world.

It is unconscionable that over the Christmas holidays here in Canada, some people were living on the streets and going hungry while others of us were buying gifts costing thousands of dollars. We live in a rich country. Shelter and food are basic human rights. Why are we not providing them?

So what should our priorities be in 2004?

The first priority should be a massive public relations program. The goal would be to increase public engagement in deciding our collective social future. Such a program should point out to Canadians just how fortunate we are to be living in Canada.

It should remind us about how 80 per cent of the rest of the world live, how children are unable to go to school, are without adequate food or water, how whole communities are in danger of being under water because of climate change, how people are having to cope in areas of disaster, including conflict and war, how our lifestyle leads us to be the largest energy users, water users and pollution makers, and how this contributes to problems of inequity on the planet.

Our second priority should be to have a national debate on the kind of society we wish to live in.

Some societies seem to manage to provide for those who are less fortunate, protect their environment and strive for social justice internationally. Somehow, we seem to have limited our vision to the minimum instead of what is possible and have become preoccupied with issues of security, both economic and military.

We do have choices. We are privileged. We are well-educated, we have a public health care system; we are beginning to recognize that taxes are the cost of a sustainable society and we do care about what is happening in other parts of the world.

So, how would we engage in a national conversation about a vision for a sustainable future? First, we need leadership; the Prime Minister, premiers, mayors, industrialists, non-government organizations, faith groups, unions, social justice and environmental activists, and those who work in the media. We all have a role to play and a right to shape the future of this country.

The question we need to discuss is, "How can we make sure our children and grandchildren can enjoy a sustainable future?"

This would be a future that provides an adequate income while conserving and protecting the environment and contributing to a more just world. It would also include a world where the culture of war and terrorism is minimized and a culture of peace, social justice and ecological integrity is encouraged.

Do we as Canadians have the vision, the courage and the leadership to pursue such a future?

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We must take on daunting challenge

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Opinion, Jan. 2, 2004.

By Javed Akbar, director Outreach, Pickering Islamic Centre.

Anne Mitchell echoes the anguish of all those people who are not merely concerned, but are actively advocating to reduce the growing ecological menace, eliminate the entrenched poverty, homelessness and its attendant inequities. And the grim statistics of child poverty

continue to haunt us. Such ugliness still persists in a nation where the availability of resources to eliminate them can never be a constraint.

Mitchell poses a daunting challenge to the policy-makers and caring individuals: "How can we make sure our children and grandchildren can enjoy a sustainable future?" Social protection as the universal right of all members of the country was fought on the belief social problems arose from structures and unequal distribution of assets and power and not from individual behavior, as we were led to believe by Conservative ideologues. We have to ensure that everybody has a life worth living and if a person is always trying to find out where the next meal is going to come from, they will never have time to find out their purpose.

On Ecological front: Environmental awareness should be more than just buzzwords. It should be a code of conduct, a mode of discipline if this planet is to survive mankind's indifference of centuries. Environmental awareness is more than proper disposal of garbage or recycling waste. It is not just about reducing carbon dioxide emissions or cutting down fewer trees and planting more. The corporate greed for profits sees no end, but we have a moral responsibility to minimize the cause and effect that generates poverty.