

# **MAUDE BARLOW'S REMARKS FOR NATIONAL HEALTH CARE SUMMIT**

**Ottawa, October 12, 2001**

Dr. Rene Favaloro was a hero to his people. A renowned Argentine heart surgeon who performed the first heart bypass operation in Cleveland in 1967, he left a lucrative practice to go back to his people and champion the cause of universal health care. He opened a state-of-the-art practice that catered to everyone from wealthy matrons to street urchins. It became South America's most advanced and most famous heart institute, conducting groundbreaking research and training specialists for the whole continent.

But, in the 1990s, Argentina became captive to the siren call of market-based globalization and slashed government subsidies to his clinic and all other public health care service providers. The country adopted U.S. style HMOs which paid incentives to doctors who ordered less costly treatment. Millions of Argentineans, who had traditionally received quality health care from their union-related cooperatives, were thrown out of work by IMF and World Bank restructuring and lost their health care altogether. In a decade, the national medicare system of Argentina went bankrupt.

At first, Dr. Favaloro refused to turn away patients. But as time passed, he became utterly overwhelmed by the number of people he could not help. He wrote to a friend: "I am living one of the worst moments of my life, just as the rest of this nation. I have become a servant knocking on doors looking for money to keep the foundation alive. These free-market reforms are better referred to as a neo-feudalism that is bringing this world toward a social disaster."

On July 29, 2000, after a light lunch of apples and tea, Rene Favaloro walked into the bathroom of his modest Buenos Aires home and put a .38 calibre bullet through his broken heart.

We Canadians have taken our universal health care system for granted. As long as most of us can remember, we have been able to consult a doctor, walk into a clinic or go to a hospital and be treated as citizens of a country that valued us all, regardless of our age, sex, race or class. But as we enter the new millennium, our precious public health care program is down for the count. It is under a death warrant, issued by the same elite forces that fought its birth in the first place.

For Canada, like Argentina, has adopted all the worst aspects of corporate globalization, and, just as in every other neo-liberalized country in the world, the values of public health care cannot co-exist with the soul-destroying values of the global economy. The Chretien government, like the Mulroney government before it, is setting medicare up for a fall.

## ***Beginnings***

Its worth taking a minute to reflect on the values that created our medicare system in the first place. Canada's social programs were forged out of the twin crucibles of the Great Depression and the Second World War. During the Depression there were no national standards for health care and relief was given to municipalities who enforced rigid residency requirements and would only give help to people when they were very ill. Based on the dominant theory of its day - giving help to the "deserving poor" - most relief money wasn't used for health care at all, but to put men in boot camps and send inspectors into homes to see if welfare recipients were cheating.

Suddenly, the same country that could not afford to house, clothe, feed or employ Canadians had all the money it needed to send them to war. Those men and women returned from that terrible ordeal changed. They were determined that they were not going back to the bread line and set out to build a social nation-state. Instead of choosing the survival of the fittest dominant ideology of the neighbours to the south, the Canadian state would be built on the foundation of sharing for survival. So they created ribbons of interdependence - the greatest of which was medicare - based on the belief in social equality, universal accessibility, national standards and public service.

## ***Betrayal***

The global economy is based on a fundamentally different set of values: social programs are just products, better delivered by the private sector; citizens are consumers who should have the "choice" to buy the best health care and education; families, not communities or governments, are the defining unit of society; young people are responsible for their success or failure; families are poor because they are losers.

The global economy sorts winners from losers and wants the dominant institutions of the state, like schools, to aid the process. Where the values that created medicare and public education asserted that every child matters, corporate capitalism disagrees. Only some children matter; the new competitive system will ensure the survival of the children of the fittest.

In this new world, everything is for sale, even those areas of life necessary for social justice, human safety and the survival of the planet. In their world, one day, everything will be owned by someone: the fish before they are caught, the rain before it falls; the wild seed deep in the forest; the very building blocks of life. Nothing in the commons is sacred to them; there is no where they cannot go to harvest the world's bounty.

But how do you take a people who believe in the values of sharing for survival and are deeply attached to their right to public health care and impose a whole new ideology and structure on them? Very carefully. By stealth. By saying you are doing one thing and doing another. By giving huge tax breaks to your corporations and, crying poor, slash health care spending to the point that citizens lose faith in their system, and start to demand tax breaks so they can buy private health care for their families.

You sign a "Social Union" that gives the provinces the right to use federal health care funding for private agencies. Bit by bit, you let large transnational for-profit health care corporations operate in your communities, and then you sign a continental free trade agreement that gives these companies the right to sue for egregious amounts of money if the citizens elect a government that tries to reassert the public interest in health care delivery. While telling the Canadian people you would *never* trade away Canada's precious public health care system, you plan, not one, but two, new trade agreements in which Canada's social services are up for grabs, to be subjected to the same ruthless rules that took down the Auto Pact and cultural protections.

### ***Belonging***

So how does a people get its universal health care system back? By taking it back. By re-committing to the values that gave rise to them in the first place. By having the courage to stand up to both governments and corporations and their agenda of head-to-head competition, privatization, deregulation and free trade. By being part of the global Day of Solidarity on November 9 when the WTO meets in Qatar to put all the health care programs in the world on the negotiating table.

Who is going to save our public health care system? Not Michael Kirby. Not Roy Romanow. Not the Chretien government. Not the provinces. We're going to have to do it. The only way to save medicare is by building a large, pan-Canadian grassroots movement, and at its heart must be the people most affected by its looming demise: seniors and youth, precarious workers, First Nations peoples, poor families. It is an enormous task. But you know what? It was even more onerous, less plausible, when our parents and grandparents set out to create universal health care the first time. They suffered greatly for our rights. Some of them died. In their name, let us commit here today not to let their dream die.

The last word to Rene Favaloro: "I have always practiced medicine with a profound social pledge. For me, all patients are equal. Every patient, paying or not, will continue to receive my attention. Health care is for everyone."

Thank you