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MAUDE BARLOW

# An activist among the stars

By starting a U.S. book tour at the Sundance festival, where she also stars in a notable documentary, Maude Barlow gives her quest for 'water justice' some celebrity status

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**By Chris Cobb**

It was Canada's tireless social activist, Maude Barlow, who inspired filmmaker Irena Salina to focus on water in her powerful new documentary *Flow*. And it was the late British poet W.H. Auden whose words she uses to set the film's tone

"Thousands have lived without love, none without water," wrote Auden. Ms. Salina made *Flow: For the Love of Water* on a shoestring budget, filming parts of it solo with a basic digital camera.

Against huge odds and formidable competition, *Flow* won the approval of Sundance Film Festival programmers and had its world premiere at the prestigious Utah event last week. Ms. Barlow, who appears numerous times in several parts of the world in *Flow*, was also at Sundance this week launching her new book *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*. *Blue Covenant*

is the sequel to Ms. Barlow's first water book, *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World's Water*.

An international leader in what she calls the "global water justice movement," Ms. Barlow boils the contest over water down to this: "On one side are powerful private interests, transnational water and food corporations, most First World governments and most of the major international institutions — including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the World Water Council and parts of the United Nations." These forces see water as a commodity to be sold and traded, she says, and have established an elaborate infrastructure to promote private control of water.

On the other side are environmentalists, human rights activists, indigenous and women's groups, small farmers, peasants and grassroots communities across

the globe fighting for communal control of water.

Water is not legally recognized as a basic human right but in the five years since Ms. Barlow published *Blue Gold*, the global water justice movement has rallied around the fight to have that happen and be enforced at all levels from the municipal to the global.

Ms. Salina's film, five years in the making is a panorama of the international water crisis and a significant swipe at the corporate interests who have become increasingly effective at buying and selling water and — she says — paying scant attention to the ecological and human health ramifications in their pursuit of profit.

*Flow* concerns itself largely with developing countries where water supplies are polluted or diverted. To emphasize the global nature of the issue, she stops in Mecosta County, Michigan where residents are battling Nestlé, who say the company has been pumping copiously and disastrously from local natural water supplies to feed its share of the \$100 billion-per-year bottled water industry.

And, in a bright but telling interlude, she films a *Candid Camera*-like caper in which a restaurant employee fills plastic drinking bottles through a garden hose in the backyard and serves them to customers for more than \$8 apiece. Each bottle, featured on a specially prepared bottled water

“menu,” has been individually labelled and priced. The kicker is a couple sipping the water from wine glasses and enthusiastically praising its quality. The point Ms. Salina makes is that “pure” bottled water is nothing more than an

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illusion — tap or river water laced with chemicals.

While at Sundance, Ms. Barlow talked up a campaign she is spearheading to save Lake Naivasha where Sundance founder Robert Redford filmed *Out of Africa*. The lake, she says, is being sucked dry by European rose growing companies. The campaign is being launched on St. Valentine’s Day, hopefully with a little push from Mr. Redford.

Ms. Salina says she is already seeing the film’s influence. “Someone said to me, ‘I hate you, Irena, because I can’t brush my teeth anymore without turning the tap off,’ and that to me is great.”

Ms. Barlow, a social activist all her working life, has long been raging against corporate globalization and the loss Canadian sovereignty she says is its inevitable consequence. For almost 20 years, she has headed Council of Canadians, the public advocacy organization she helped form in 1985 to fight Brian Mulroney’s Free Trade Agreement with U.S. president Ronald Reagan. She said then that that the agreement would result in the steady erosion of all the social programs Canadians hold dear. They lost the battle, but are still fighting the war.

“You win some and you lose some,” says Ms. Barlow, now 60. “It’s all incremental — slow but exciting.”

She has six honorary doctorates and has won numerous international awards including the 2005 Right Livelihood Award, known as the “Alternative Nobel.” Between her Council of Canadians work, she trots the globe to work on development issues, usually related to water, which is her passion. Books — she’s written

or co-written six of them — are an important tool in her lobbying arsenal.

She’s learned a few things about influencing government since she worked as prime minister Pierre Trudeau’s senior advisor on women’s issues in the mid-1980s, and before that in the Office of Equal Opportunity for Women at the City of Ottawa.

Mr. Trudeau, she says, didn’t

believe in special treatment for women any more than he believed in special treatment for Quebec, but “if a woman sprung up and showed herself capable, he would treat her as an equal.”

The experience taught Ms. Barlow that in a world of competing interests, even having the ear of the prime minister is no guarantee of getting your way. More effective, she says, is to generate people power and mobilize the people who vote for the prime minister.

“We’ve tried to create a climate of political negotiation and awareness,” she says, “and a social movement of knowledgeable and politically sensitive citizens to fight for social and environment rights in their communities. We have 80,000 members at any given time and 73 activist chapters across the country which meet, send letters to the editor, send cards and e-mails to politicians.

It’s gets their attention. It’s more effective.”

When she took over as national chairperson of the Council of Canadians it was, she adds, the time of a great surge in the power of corporations: “And these corporations were going transnational to dictate to governments what their social and environmental safety policies would be. As corporations move across boundaries they look for the lowest possible standards to make the norm.”

“Canada used to be egg shaped with a large middle class,” she says, “but that’s not how we look any more. Canada has lost control of its energy, which is exactly what

we predicted would happen. We send 70 per cent to the U.S. today and back then it was 25 per cent. It isn’t Canadian energy any more, it’s North American energy. And we were also right when we said if something under NAFTA doesn’t suit the United States they will not abide by it. Softwood lumber is the obvious example.”

Ms. Barlow and her colleagues are convinced that Canada’s fresh water will be next, unless the federal government gets together with the provinces and develops a national water policy.

“People have said to me ‘what’s the worry, there’s nothing but water here.’ Yeh, that’s what they said about the cod. We have a myth of abundance here but we need to take care of the water. We have declining Great Lakes and Alberta is being drained of water to produce energy. We need a National Water Act that would establish Canada’s jurisdiction over its water.”

After 20 years talking water, Ms. Barlow says there is progress in Canada — however small. The federal Liberals have a water critic and promise to create a junior ministerial portfolio out of it.

Her working life is split between the national and international, travelling the world as a member of three international boards: Food and Water Watch, the International Forum on Globalization and the World Future Council.

“It’s great work, she says. “I speak to kids in schools and tell them

*“Canada has lost control of its energy, which is exactly what we predicted would happen”*

you can build a life around making money, and that’s fine, but if you want something that gets you up in the morning, then fighting for social and environmental justice is a great life.”



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