

“EXCITING, TUMULTUOUS, PASSIONATE”

MAUDE BARLOW REFLECTS ON THE COUNCIL OF CANADIANS’ 20 YEARS OF ACTIVISM



On the occasion of Council’s 20th anniversary, National Chairperson Maude Barlow took some time from her busy schedule to meet with Brent Patterson to reflect on the past, present and future of The Council of Canadians.

Brent Patterson: What comes to mind when you think back to the early days of the Council of Canadians in 1985?

Maude Barlow: I was fortunate enough to be involved from the very beginning. Mel Hurtig called me and said that I should come to a meeting in Toronto. I went and everyone I admired in the world was there – Bob White, Christine McCall, Stephen Clarkson, David Suzuki – just a wonderful group of people. My memory is of a frenetic round of meetings that ended in the launching of this new organization called The

Council of Canadians. There was the excitement of knowing so clearly who we were and what we were about. Those were heady, exciting, tumultuous, passionate early days.

BP: What do you see as the Council’s contribution to the last 20 years of political life?

MB: We’ve had some tremendous wins. We stopped a big pension grab, we stopped the bovine growth hormone, and we stopped the bank mergers. I can point to being deeply part of both Seattle and Cancun, where twice we stopped

the World Trade Organization (WTO). I look at wins like stopping genetically engineered wheat and the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. These are big, powerful wins that we accomplished with others. We haven’t stopped the neo-liberal agenda. But I defy anybody to think about what Canada would look like without the Council of Canadians.

BP: In 1984, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney said, “Give us 20 years and you will not recognize this country.” Do you recognize Canada today?

MB: It’s tremendously different, but it’s not as different as it would have been had they got everything they wanted. Conrad Black left Canada because this revolution wasn’t happening fast enough. But we’ve lost many of our social programs. Canada has had the highest rise in child poverty in the industrialized world. There has been an assault on schools in Canada to make education conform to the global economy. Environmental responsibilities, particularly to fresh water, have been let go. These are very negative changes.

At the same time, we have stopped many terrible things. Yes, the country has gone through its “cold shower of competition,” as Mulroney put it, but I think that our essential values didn’t change in the way he wanted them to. And there’s a deep and abiding resistance to this agenda in our country. Twenty years hasn’t changed our values.

BP: What excites you about the Council of Canadians today?

MB: We're still on the leading edge of the major issues in our country and in the world. Not since Mulroney gave his "open for business" speech in New York in 1984 has there been this kind of push to bring in the next level of deep integration with the United States. This is a military-security-energy pact zip-locking North America. It's dangerous.

I'm also really proud of the good work we're doing internationally. We are a true presence around the world. We're seen as leaders of the opposition to the WTO and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Since Seattle we've become, to a great extent, for the people in the South, the face of civil society in the North. I'm very proud of the work we've done on water. I know we can learn more from the people we work with in countries like Bolivia, Uruguay and South Africa. We have some wonderful relationships internationally, and I think that we're highly respected. I'm tremendously proud of that.

BP: What's your take on the global civil society movement today?

MB: After September 11, there just isn't tolerance for mass protest. That was the case in Miami for the last meeting of the FTAA. I was in Hawaii for an Asia Development Bank meeting two years ago, and the police presence was the same. You couldn't breathe without looking at a police club. They had us cordoned off and locked in. So I think this is the reality that we are dealing with. This doesn't mean that street protest doesn't matter, but I think we're recognizing that we also have to find new ways. They're never going to give us another Seattle. We aren't going to get that opportunity again.

We are doing a great deal of work around alternatives. We all thought neo-liberal globalization was failing the day it started, but now it has been proven to be a



failure even to many people who supported it. So the question now is, what have we got to offer in its place?

BP: The Council has been described in the media as nationalist. Today, much of your work has an internationalist perspective. Has the Council changed?

MB: Yes, I've gone through a change and so has the organization – although if you were to go back to our original declaration you'd see we were very much talking about Canada and the world. But it has

truly been a transformation. We were fighting for Canadian social programs, Canadian culture, Canadian water and Canadian energy. Now I think we see it much more as sovereignties – democratic sovereignty, the right for sovereign people to make decisions for themselves, and how that's part of the rights that the people around the world have.

BP: You've said, "If you want to know who is going to change this country go home and look in the mirror." What role do citizens have in a democracy?

MB: First of all, people should know that they have not only the right, but also the responsibility to be what some of us call "intentional citizens." You can make a difference. People can feel overwhelmed, that there is nothing they can do. I hear this all the time. I say of course there is – we're actually winning, truly we are. You have to give people this sense of hope and it's surprising how much of a difference individuals can make.

Being about something larger than yourself gives you a reason to live. It will take you through bad times, family problems, deaths of loved ones and terrible disappointments in life. Caring about something larger than yourself, having something you believe in that gets you up in the morning – that is not about making money and not about advancing your career, but about something else – is the best thing you can do for your mental and physical health. Get out there and be part of something wonderful. Get out and fight for social justice. It will make your day.

Brent Patterson is the Director of Organizing for The Council of Canadians. A longer version of this interview was published in the January/February 2005 issue of Canadian Dimension magazine.