

“A POWERFUL, GLOBAL MOVEMENT”

MAUDE BARLOW EXPLAINS WHY THE SOLUTION TO THE WORLD WATER CRISIS IS IN OUR HANDS

by Ariel Troster

Maude Barlow is about to hit the road again. With a new book, *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*, hot off the presses, the long-time activist and National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians is gearing up to tour Canada to talk about one of her favourite topics – how to save the world’s water from privatization and exploitation. She took some time from her busy schedule to sit down with *Canadian Perspectives* to reflect on the growing movement for water justice both at home and abroad.

It’s been six years since you wrote your first big book about water issues, *Blue Gold*. What changes have you seen in the global water justice movement since then?

When I first wrote *Blue Gold*, the global water justice movement was still in its infancy – vibrant, but young and unconnected. In the years intervening, we have built a powerful, global movement. We work in solidarity to support each other’s struggles. Collectively, we have discredited the World Bank, the World Water Council and all of those who promote private control of water.



Meera Karunanathan

A concrete example of the movement’s sophisticated level of organization is the way we organized around the referendum that took place in Uruguay in 2004, which entrenched the right to water in the country’s constitution, forcing it to be delivered as a public service. There were very powerful forces arguing against it. The Council of Canadians’ Blue Planet Project worked with national and international partners to organize support from all over the world to flood into Uruguay. Our message was, “The whole world is watching, and it matters. You are making history here.” It made the Uruguay government feel very proud. This was a victory in one country, but because of the solidarity behind it, it has served as an inspiration to activists all over the world.

By working together, we’ve managed to discredit the big water corporations and the international financial institutions. At every one of the tri-annual World Water Summit meetings, we have organized opposition on a huge scale. We were at The Hague in 2000, in Kyoto in 2003 and in Mexico City in 2006. Activists from all over the world converged and refuted claims that privatization is working. Together, we promoted a public alternative for water.

Working with research institutes like the Public Services International Research Unit and the World Development Movement in Europe and Food and Water Watch in the U.S., we have conducted in-depth studies to demonstrate that not only has privatization failed in the developing world, but – this is really important – since the privatization experiments started, the net amount of money flowing from the global North to the global South on water projects has decreased substantially. Thinking the private companies would invest in water development, the World Bank and the development agencies of the rich countries pulled back their aid. The net effect was an overall decrease in funding for water services at a time when demand was exploding.

How are the threats to Canada’s water related to the threats you see to the world’s water internationally?

The threats to Canada’s water are a little different, but in many ways the same. The big private water companies haven’t had success yet in convincing local governments to hand over contracts for private water delivery – that’s been the big struggle in the South. Our struggle is more about protecting water from commercial export to the United States.

In Canada, we have no national water policy to protect water ecologically or politically. In *Blue Covenant*, I talk about three myths associated with Canada’s water. The first is the myth of

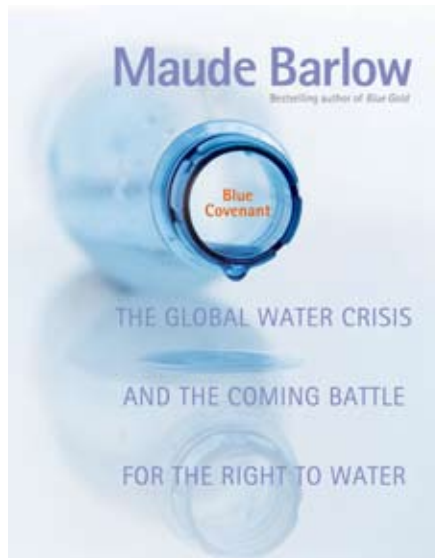
abundance – the idea that Canada has unlimited water to spare. The second is that Canada actually cares for its water – which is easily de-bunked when you see the appalling way we treat our water ecologically. The third myth is that Canada’s water is protected from export, which is absolutely false.

In the end, both struggles are about ensuring public control and sovereign stewardship of a precious resource.

What’s the first thing you would like people to do after reading your book?

I would hope that people would hold water in their heads, hearts and souls, so that we could start to collectively have a relationship with water, one that more closely resembles the Aboriginal approach to water as a sacred part of nature. This would go a long way in confronting the global water crisis.

On a personal level, people can make decisions about their water use. Do



they need that big lawn? Do they need to do that extra load of dishes in the dishwasher? We need to confront the use and abuse of water in our daily lives.

I would also like people to become “water watchers” – aware of the water

systems in their area. I would hope that they would work to protect them ecologically, and also that they would get involved if a privatization fight is looming. I also challenge people to become “water warriors,” and fight for the right of all peoples around the world to accessible clean water for life.

On a federal level, the Council of Canadians needs people to work with us to fight for a national water policy. In my book, I describe what an effective policy might look like. We need our supporters to contact their Members of Parliament and help make this happen.

Maude Barlow’s new book, *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*, hits the stands this month. Visit www.canadians.org for ordering information and to find out if her book tour is visiting a community near you.

THE COUNCIL OF CANADIANS ENCOURAGED BY UN HIGH COMMISSIONER’S REPORT ON THE RIGHT TO WATER

Following the release of a report on water by Louise Arbour, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Council of Canadians is calling for an immediate halt to water privatization and a review of all existing forms of privatization.

“Madame Arbour is unambiguous in demanding that states ensure effective monitoring of human rights violations pertaining to water through a system of penalties. This is a step forward,” says Anil Naidoo of the Council of Canadians’ Blue Planet Project. “But due to the limitations of her mandate she falls short of call-

ing for an absolute restriction on all water privatization.”

“Madame Arbour states that privatization should not take place in the absence of a clear and efficient regulatory framework that can maintain sustainable access to safe, sufficient, physically accessible and affordable water and sanitation,” says Canadian lawyer Steven Shrybman. “Because the vast majority of cases of water privatization have occurred without these conditions being met, the only responsible thing to do is to call for a moratorium and review of all water privatization schemes.”

“We would encourage the Human Rights Council to continue to

work on this subject with the High Commissioner and to appoint a Special Rapporteur on Water,” says Maude Barlow, author of the forthcoming book *Blue Covenant* and co-founder of the Blue Planet Project. “The water justice movement will not give up until water is fully recognized as a human right enshrined at all levels of government from local ordinances, to nation-state constitutions, to a full UN covenant.”

To read Anil Naidoo’s reflections on his participation in the crafting of Madame Arbour’s report at the International Expert Seminar in Berlin, visit www.blueplanetproject.net.