

# The Council of Canadians: Celebrating 25 years of action

By Jan Malek



Since 1985, the Council of Canadians has brought people together to act for social, economic and environmental justice here in Canada and around the world. Our work is built on a strong foundation of timely and strategic campaigns to fight for the values, social programs and progressive policies that Canadians believe in. As we celebrate the Council of Canadians' 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2010, we are reminded of our strong history and many victories, and we look forward to an even brighter future with the dedicated support of our members, donors and chapter activists. Here are some highlights of our work over the last 25 years.

## 1985

On March 11, the Council of Canadians is founded, with the goals of "a new and better Canada with more and better jobs for Canadians, a higher standard of living for Canadians, and a sovereign Canada that plays an important role among the world community of nations." Within a year, membership in the Council grows to 3,000.

## 1986

The Council establishes itself as a voice for economic sovereignty, organizing protests over the sale of Canadian enterprises to offshore interests – de Havilland to Boeing, Prentice-Hall to Gulf & Western, and West Kootenay Power and Light to Utilicorp of Kansas.

## 1987

The Council organizes a "Canada Summit" to coincide with U.S. President Ronald Reagan's visit to Ottawa. The Pro-Canada Network (later the Action Canada Network) is created and its members tape the Canada Summit Declaration to the front door of Parliament Hill's Centre Block.

## 1988

Newly elected Council Chairperson Maude Barlow, along with Canadian Auto Workers President Bob White, debate free trade with Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed and corporate lobbyist Tom d'Aquino on national television. While Lougheed and d'Aquino speak in generalities, White and Barlow focus on the technicalities and the destructive nature of the agreement.

## 1989

The Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement comes into effect on January 1. Six months later, the Council releases a "Report Card" on the deal, stating that despite government promises to the contrary, more than 33,000 jobs have already been lost due to free trade.

## 1990

Council Chairperson Maude Barlow and former chairperson John Trent appear before the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing. They ask for a reduction and monitoring of third-party advocacy and advertising during elections to make it difficult for a group to dominate debate due to financial power.

## 1991

The Council, along with Friends of Canadian Broadcasting and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, forms a coalition called "100 Days of Action" to try to stop drastic cuts to the CBC. More than 1,000 employees and 11 regional production centres were to be cut in the 1991 federal budget. The public outcry forces the government to back off on some of the planned cuts.

## 1992

The Council takes over the signing ceremony for the new North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Activists hold up an American flag behind Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in a photo that is flashed around the world. Maude Barlow yells to Mulroney, "You promised to protect basic democracy. You have failed to keep your promise."



**1993**

The Council brings Carlos Heredia – a former opposition leader in Mexico who had his 1988 election victory thwarted by President Carlos Salinas – to Canada to “testify” against NAFTA when the CBC’s *The National* puts the deal “on trial.” Salinas steps down a year later to campaign for the position of head of the World Trade Organization.

**1994**

Maude Barlow writes a letter to the Council’s membership asking for their advice: “We have lost twice now (the passage of the FTA and NAFTA), and perhaps it is time to accept defeat and move on.” The response is overwhelming – members declare that the Council is needed now more than ever. With the federal government poised to grant Monsanto the right to market bovine growth hormone (BGH) in Canada, the Council builds a strong national coalition, organizes a campaign, and in 1998 wins a moratorium against the introduction of BGH in Canada.

**1995**

The Council gives Prime Minister Jean Chrétien a failing grade on “social policy” in a mid-term “Report Card” on his government. Chrétien receives his “F” for the Canada Health and Social Transfer cuts of \$7 billion that put Canada’s public health care system, post-secondary education and vital social services at risk.

**1996**

The Council holds a demonstration outside of the finance ministers’ meeting

in Ottawa to protest planned cuts to the Canada Pension Plan (CPP). Council members present Finance Minister Paul Martin and his provincial counterparts with 100,000 petitions against the cuts. The government of British Columbia agrees and blocks Martin’s plans to cut the CPP.

**1997**

The Council loses the first round of its fight to stop Conrad Black’s take-over of the Southam newspaper chain. The Court states that the Council isn’t entitled to appeal the government’s approval of the deal because the Council isn’t “commercially affected.”

**1998**

A new global investment treaty of unprecedented power sets off a firestorm of protest, much of it led by the Council. When negotiations for the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) break down, the Council launches a coast-to-coast inquiry into what values and policies Canadians want their government to put forward in international negotiations.

With four of Canada’s biggest banks set to merge, and with the loss of thousands of jobs and the closure of hundreds of local branches at stake, the Council launches a well-publicized cross-country campaign to convince Finance Minister Paul Martin to reject the plans. By December, Martin rules against the bank mergers.

**1999**

The Council, along with international partners, launches a national education and

action campaign to confront the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) “Millennium Round” negotiations. The outbreak of democracy on the streets during the “Battle in Seattle” leads to the complete collapse of the WTO talks.

**2000**

The Council challenges attempts by the world’s biggest water corporations to privatize the planet’s fresh water. In the process, a new international network of activists is formed composed of people committed to promoting universal recognition of water as a fundamental human right and to halting efforts by corporations to control and commodify it.

**2001**

The Council works as part of a broad-based movement to counter the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiations in Quebec City. The result is one of the biggest demonstrations ever held in Canada. Committed activists with thoughtful alternatives to free trade are met by tear gas, water-cannon spray and rubber bullets.

**2002**

The Council gives the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada the clear message that health care must be properly funded, that it should be expanded to include pharmaceutical and home care, and that it must be protected from international trade agreements. The Council holds public events in 15 cities across Canada where Romanow Commission hearings are being held.



### 2003

The Council is present at the WTO Ministerial in Cancun and the FTAA negotiations in Miami. Council members bring the message that “another world is possible” and play a key role in the derailment of the WTO and FTAA talks.

### 2004

Bowing to pressure from consumers and organizations like the Council of Canadians, Monsanto abandons its application to produce and sell genetically engineered wheat in Canada.

The Council launches its Citizens’ Inquiry on Canada-U.S. Relations to counter an all-out push by the business elite of Canada to promote deep integration with the United States. Deep integration includes a common market and border, a guaranteed and uninterrupted supply of energy to the U.S., and participation in George W. Bush’s defence and “security” initiatives.

### 2005

The Council comes full circle and renews its fight for Canadian sovereignty and democracy by focusing its energies opposing the threat of deeper economic integration with the United States. We centre our fight on the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) signed this year between Canada, the United States and Mexico and question why the expansive deal never makes it to Parliament for public debate.

### 2006

We challenge the “benefits” of free trade deals and echo the resounding criticism of the Harper government’s handling of NAFTA’s softwood lumber affair. Despite the fact that Canada won several NAFTA panel rulings ordering the U.S. to pay back \$5 billion in export tariffs, Prime Minister Stephen Harper strikes a deal with the Bush government that sells Canadians short.

### 2007

Thousands of people converge in Montebello, Quebec to protest the SPP as Prime Minister Stephen Harper meets behind closed doors with U.S. President George Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderón. A teach-in organized by the Council earlier in the year draws more than 1,500 people from across Canada and around the world.

### 2008

Along with First Nations communities, the Council raises awareness about the devastating impacts of the Alberta and Saskatchewan-based tar sands. Witnessing the destruction of massive areas of ravaged earth and vast amounts of water turned into toxic tailing ponds first-hand, Maude Barlow calls the tar sands “Canada’s Mordor,” referring to Tolkien’s vision of a barren wasteland in *Lord of the Rings*.

### 2009

The Council celebrates two major victories: The secretive SPP deal is defeated and plans for Site 41, a landfill proposed in Simcoe County, Ontario, on top of an aquifer containing “some of the purest water in the world,” are abandoned following a long fight for the protection of this water source by community residents, First Nations, Council members and chapter activists.

### 2010

After years of work to build an international water movement, on July 28, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly agrees to a resolution declaring the human right to “safe and clean drinking water and sanitation.” The resolution has 122 countries vote in its favour, while 41 countries – including Canada – abstain.

This year, the Council of Canadians celebrates 25 years of acting for social justice with a strong and growing membership base and intense commitment to protecting our fresh water, strengthening public health care, fighting for fair trade deals, and pushing for climate justice and an energy strategy that protects our environment and focuses on renewable and sustainable energy sources.

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