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Global Concern Now Mainstream Thinking

By Zack Gross

It's what we've always waited for! Concern about global issues, and support for assisting those less fortunate in "developing" countries, is at an all-time high!

An Ipsos-Reid Poll, taken across Canada a few months ago, indicated that 70% of the country believed that we should be using a substantial portion of our \$12 billion surplus to aid victims of global disasters. As well, just a couple of years ago, a similar poll showed that 57% of Canadians were prepared to pay 1% more in taxes if those funds went to support the world's poorest peoples.

Meanwhile, in 2005-06, 300,000 Canadians have signed up to the hugely successful Make Poverty History campaign that has had the backing of celebrity athletes and entertainers such as the Phoenix Suns' Canadian-born Steve Nash and British rockers Bono and Bob Geldof. The campaign has now been extended to at least 2007.

Gerry Barr, President and CEO of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC), based in Ottawa, speaking recently in Winnipeg, said that those who have advocated on behalf of the global poor have been given an incredible opportunity. Finally, their concerns have become mainstream – a beachhead has been established in public opinion – we have arrived!

As well, our previous government saw itself as a leader among the G-8 on international poverty and environmental issues. Our new government, while rejecting Liberal support for the Kyoto Accord, seems predisposed to supporting, at least to some extent, the Make Poverty History fourteen watchwords – More & Better Aid, Fair Trade, Cancel the Debt, End Child Poverty in Canada.

One doesn't need to think too far back to remember days when global issues did not appear on anyone's priority list. Time magazine had a special edition where they counted down the public's forty identified greatest concerns, with international development bringing up the rear at #40. Canadians pollsters more recently circulated a list of our top twenty issues, with world poverty an honorable mention after the twenty.

So, what has gotten us from there to here? And is this level of support sustainable? Here are a few reasons for relief and poverty alleviation being near the top of the agenda:

- Recent natural disasters – with the increasing number of weather-related and other natural disasters, Canadians are responding in sympathy as something they can actually see on television hits innocent, everyday people. Television and the internet have made the world a small

community and our desire to help out our neighbour now extends to Indonesia, Pakistan, Guatemala and the Philippines. We have also become more aware of, and concerned about, global climate change as evidence piles up to show that our own future is in doubt.

- 9-11 – September 11, 2001 woke a lot of people up to the wider world. It's too bad that it took such a tragedy! What happens around the world now means more to us, as we realize that it could happen to us, too. Now, with Canada's growing military involvement in the so-called War on Terror, we are even more a part of this process. What we also need to understand are the political, cultural and economic forces at work that have created disenfranchisement, terrorism, oil dependency and war.
- The Slaughter in Rwanda – likely we didn't know it was happening when it did, back in 1994, as 800,000 people were killed in tribal violence in central Africa and a related civil and regional war. But, thanks to Canadian General Romeo Dallaire and his book "Shake Hands with the Devil", and to the Hollywood movie Hotel Rwanda, we realize that our side of the world let the slaughter happen, just as people turned a blind eye to even more deaths during the holocaust of World War II.
- The Leadership of Stephen Lewis – somehow, Stephen Lewis, with his speeches and his books, is getting through to Canadians – on poverty alleviate, on the emancipation of women in traditional societies, on HIV/AIDS and more. Love him or hate him, he won't leave us alone! A campaign is now under way to have Lewis nominated for the next Nobel Peace Prize.
- Make Poverty History – when was it last cool to care about the world? A global campaign, conceived in the UK and taken on doubtfully by North America and Europe, has made a huge impact on young people whose thinking may have been previously dominated by chasing mcjobs and corporate brand names. In Manitoba alone, thousands of students have involved themselves in school events, provincial conferences, public meetings, and presentations to decision-makers, to learn about and promote those fourteen words.

With vision and energy, those who can lead us on these issues – in our country and in our communities – can now make a real difference in how our world works. Whether it is by raising funds, changing policies or adopting more globally conscious lifestyles, it can be done. Whether as politicians or preachers, teachers, students or activists, labour or in business, now exists the opportunity we mustn't let get away.

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