

Douglas Roche

Bread

Not

Bombs

A Political Agenda for
Social Justice

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A Political Agenda for
Social Justice



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Canada

For my grandson

Nicholas Nolan Roche Hurley

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Introduction

A Fateful Phone Call

On the Friday before Labour Day 1998, I was working on my computer at home, preparing for a speaking tour across Canada on the nuclear weapons issue. The phone rang, interrupting my concentration. An official of the Prime Minister's Office wanted to know the answer to a question: if the Prime Minister decided to appoint me a Senator, would I accept?

I found myself incredulous that the Prime Minister of Canada would invite me to become a Senator. I was content in my life as an educator and activist, and happy that, after 18 years in public life as a Member of Parliament and an Ambassador, I had recovered my freedom to speak, write, and teach my view of the human security agenda, unencumbered by party discipline and government policy. I thought I had seen the last of Parliament Hill and the Ottawa establishment.

Fifty years ago, when I left university, I became a journalist. My work took me through all the regions of the world, and I discovered the "global village." I wrote the life stories of a farmer in India, an Ibo teacher in Nigeria, a Communist labour leader in Venezuela. I found out that most of the world is nonwhite, non-Western and non-Christian, but that people everywhere, regardless of their background, wanted the same things: food, water, housing, work, and a chance to bring up their children in decency and hope.

In mid-life, in 1972, seeking a wider forum for my ideas about social justice, I ran and was elected to the House of Commons. In fact, I was elected four times and, caught in a cacophony of voices, tried to specialize in the areas of disarmament and development. I started going to the United Nations

where I thought more serious work to alleviate the distresses of the human condition was being done than in Parliament. Frankly, I found the constraints of party discipline over-bearing.

I left Parliament of my own volition, determined to devote myself to the issues of disarmament and development. My timing was fortunate. The new Conservative government of 1984 needed an Ambassador for Disarmament. I accepted the appointment and worked for several years at the United Nations and a round of disarmament conferences in Geneva, Stockholm, and Vienna. I chaired the weekly meetings of the western nations at the U.N. throughout my tenure and, in 1988, was elected Chairman of the U.N. Disarmament Committee.

As the 1990s dawned, I felt the need to return to private life and was invited to become a Visiting Professor at the University of Alberta. I created my own 400-level seminar, "War or Peace in the 21st Century?" and found new vigour in challenging young—and very bright—minds to think about the conditions for peace in new ways that went beyond the rigidities of the "realism" school of political science. Being chosen by the student body as one of the best teachers at the University of Alberta reinforced my confidence that I could help a new generation discover a better road to peace and security.

I became involved in several nongovernmental organizations and founded a new body, the Middle Powers Initiative (MPI). MPI is a carefully focussed campaign, embracing prominent international citizens' organizations, to encourage the leaders of the Nuclear Weapons States to break free from their Cold War mindset and move rapidly to a nuclear-weapon-free world, which is now considered by many experts to be feasible.

Ten years after the supposed end of the Cold War, 35,000 nuclear weapons remain, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is spreading. The maintenance of nuclear weapons in the world today is an outrage against God and humanity. They are, as I have written previously, "the ultimate evil." The public has forgotten how calamitous for humanity a nuclear war would be.

Society accepts the presence of nuclear weapons because we accept violence. The 20th century was the bloodiest century in the history of humanity, with more than 110 million people killed in wars, three times as many people than all the war deaths in all the previous centuries from the first century A.D.

The killing record was maintained throughout the 1990s—Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Haiti, The Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka. These are just some of the countries from virtually all the regions of the world whose hopes for growth and prosperity were stifled by chronic conflicts.

The Gulf War in 1991 claimed more than 100,000 lives, cost \$60 billion, and caused immense human suffering. More than 800,000 people were slaughtered in internecine warfare in Rwanda. NATO's bombing of Serbia and Kosovo, in response to atrocities and ethnic cleansing carried out by the Serbs, left a trail of destruction that will disrupt life into the next generation.

While wars are being fought, consuming vast amounts of resources, the world's poorest people are falling farther behind. During the past decade, inequalities have worsened throughout Asia, and poverty has skyrocketed in a crumbling Russia. Housing, health, and education services are desperately needed throughout the developing countries. Yet the 20 percent of the world's people who live in the high-income countries account for 86 percent of the total private consumption expenditures. In latter years, the gap between the rich and poor has widened enormously.

Though we in Canada are blessed beyond belief by world standards, we have no reason to be smug or complacent. In the past ten years, the number of poor people in Canada has risen from 3.7 million to more than 5 million, which is 18 percent of the population; more than 1.5 million children (one in five of all the children in the country) live in poverty. Across Canada, governments have slashed social, health, and education funding. Government deficits have been reduced on the backs of the poor. Canada's aid program has been emasculated, but the country's military spending stays at excessively high levels.

Gross disparities and misplaced priorities at home and abroad are staring us in the face. Social justice in a world of plenty seems farther off than ever. The double standards of politics reveal an intellectual corruption aided and abetted by a corporate-controlled media. There is an anger inside me as I see what exists and what ought to be.

We fight wars that should not be fought. We maintain nuclear weapons that constantly endanger humanity. We spend money on excessive militarism at the expense of the poor. The way in which the public is manipulated into believing that militarism buys peace is the greatest intellectual insult of all.

Fulminating against outrage is not very productive. Anger without correction merely leads to cynicism. I have tried throughout my professional life to point to new and better ways to attain peace and human security. Lighting a candle rather than cursing the darkness has been far more satisfying. And I have learned along the way.

One of the things I learned was not to close doors of opportunity. While it was not very appealing to immerse myself once more in the slings and arrows of public life, nor to get on an airplane every week to fly to Ottawa and live in a hotel, I realized that a senatorial base would give me access to more decision-makers and enlarge my ability to be heard.

I was still running a mixture of emotions—astonishment, apprehension, pleasure—when Prime Minister Jean Chretien called me a few days later. He said he wanted to recognize the work I had done on peace issues and encouraged me to use the Senate platform to widen my audience on the United Nations' issues of disarmament, development, and human rights. When he then said I could sit as an Independent Senator, I realized in a flash that the maximum moment in my life had come: I could use my experience, knowledge, access, and freedom to tell Canadians what I believe needs to be said about making our society a more humane place. The invitation to join the Senate was an offer I could not refuse.

My re-immersion into the political world came through a controversial appointment. The movement for an elected Senate had been building up in Alberta for some time, the result of a feeling of political alienation. An election was actually under way in Alberta in which voters in municipal elections could also designate Senators in Waiting. The Prime Minister did not recognize such an ad hoc election, which is not provided for in the Constitution of Canada. The Constitution provides for the Governor General, upon the advice of the Prime Minister, to summon qualified persons to the Senate. The Prime Minister, to uphold his constitutional position, had decided to make an appointment in the same manner that all 105 Canadian Senators have been appointed. And he was selecting me.

The Reform Party leadership criticized the manner of the appointment but did not attack me personally. Actually, I felt a great deal of support throughout the province.

With many other politicians and people across Canada, I believe in an elected Senate and am working to bring this about through a due process of constitutional reform. The Senate certainly needs to be reformed. It should be elected, more equitable in its representation, and more effective. That struggle continues, as we expand democracy in the modern world. But I did not become a Senator to work only on this one political problem. Political machinations are always with us.

In my first speech to the Senate, I presented three issues that are central to me personally—equitable economic and social development, reform of the Senate, and setting out a forthright Canadian policy to support the abolition of nuclear weapons. I talked about the poverty I had seen in Alberta and called for a re-investment, now that Alberta's economy was flourishing, in the essential social programs that have been so severely affected by the province's cutbacks. I drew the attention of the Senate to the "high potential for a significant Canadian contribution to international peace and security" and called upon Canada "to work for peace, reconciliation and social justice in the world."

It is the social justice agenda that I want to devote the major share of my energies to. There is too much suffering, too many disparities, too much political duplicity, too much danger in the world for me to be silent. The outrages of militarism and poverty must be addressed. To advance a political agenda for social justice is the reason I became an Alberta Senator.

Bread Not Bombs is about a peace for the 21st century that can only be obtained by advancing a social justice agenda. My theme throughout is that in the new world of “globalization,” peace, security, and development are inter-linked and must be advanced simultaneously through an integrated agenda. The crises in the world, which I elaborate in the first part, “Human Insecurity: Double Standards,” are so severe that urgent political attention is required. Building the conditions for peace, described in the second part, “Human Security: An Agenda for the 21st Century,” is the new “reality” of our time. The new tools of public diplomacy, outlined in the final part, “Social Justice: A Daily Struggle,” must be used. The agenda I describe can no longer be dismissed as “idealistic.” The multiple crises in the world demand a higher form of politics.

Human Insecurity

Double Standards

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The Poor Get Poorer

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Quite simply, poverty is growing dramatically in Alberta. This poverty is not only among social assistance recipients and the marginally employed. Poverty is also growing among working families and among previously middle class families.

...

Cuts to social assistance payments have placed recipients not just below the “poverty line” (which they were before), but below the “basic necessities line.” These Albertans cannot meet basic requirements for life like food and shelter anymore.

Listen To Me, Report of the Quality of Life Commission

In the mid-1990s, I was asked to join the Quality of Life Commission, formed by a group of citizens in Edmonton concerned about the effect of the Alberta Government’s social spending cuts on the lives of poor people. My eyes were opened to the plight of the poor in Alberta. The Commission, operating with modest means, exposed the human dimensions of the poverty scandal in Canada. That scandal lies not only in the fact that governments are letting the poor get poorer but that they are being marginalized in a society increasingly dominated by the strong and rich.

After many interviews with poor people in Alberta, the Commission produced a report, *Listen to Me*. It recorded the stories of several Albertans, mostly women, minorities, aboriginal people, and children, whose quality of life had deteriorated as a result of government cuts in education, health, and social services. Those cuts were instituted when Premier Ralph Klein was elected in 1993 and the new government determined to wipe out the \$3.8 billion deficit. This was accomplished in two years through such measures as a 20 percent cut in every department's budget. Health services were restricted, social assistance payments cut drastically, and tuition at post-secondary institutions hiked sharply.

A well-educated mother of three children living on social assistance told the Commission that she had recently developed a small business that needed a few months to reach the point where she would no longer need social assistance. The social services department ruled that if she continued her business she would no longer be eligible for social assistance. Fearful that she would not be able to provide for her children over the next few months, she dropped the business to ensure her eligibility. "With a little flexibility, I could be on my own now," she said. "Instead, I'm still on welfare."

An inner city minister operating a food bank said that before the government cuts, his church gave out food to 400 persons a month; in two years the number jumped to 3,000. The church used to serve a hot meal once a week to about 250 people; after the cuts, the hot meal was provided daily. A clothing bank used to be open one day a week; with increased demand, it began to operate daily and spread to a whole floor of the church.

A young single mother finishing her fourth year of university told the Commission that when she graduated, her student loan would be "enormous." She said: "I would like not to have to worry about how I'm going to clothe my children and provide for them. I would like not to have to worry about running out of toilet paper and female hygiene products. I would like to know that I can go to the hospital and receive service for health needs."

The object of the government cutbacks was not only to eliminate the annual deficit but to pay down the debt. The deficit was quickly curbed and, by 1999, the province's net debt was eliminated (meaning the province's assets exceeded existing debt). The government celebrated this accomplishment 11 years ahead of schedule by giving a free hot dog lunch to government employees. Lost in the celebration was the price the poor had paid through *shrinking municipal grants, low welfare support, hospital bed closures, soaring tuition fees and large class sizes, and reduced services for the mentally disabled.*

After the initial severe cutbacks, the government did increase its funding in the health, education, and social services sectors, but when population growth and inflation are factored in, all three areas continue to suffer from under-funding. Stories abound of the continued heavy demand on food banks, the dramatic increase in child welfare caseloads, the doubling of university tuition costs in a five-year period, and the overloaded conditions in the province's hospitals. While funding for public programs had at one time been among the highest in the country, Alberta ranks last among the provinces in per capita public health expenditures.

In addition to the financial cutbacks, a harshness towards the poor began to be noted, as elitist private interests not only captured the public policy agenda but public debate as well. When the Quality of Life Commission brought its findings to a meeting with four government ministers, the politicians dismissed our report as "anecdotal." We tried to point out that inordinate financial pressures on the poor creates an alienated class that destabilizes society.

Poverty, family breakdown, and alienation come with consequences. People are left fragile, isolated, and apathetic. The negative effects of such social exclusion are resentment and disaffection, and they ultimately erode the threads of social fabric. Families who do not get proper nutrition are sick more often. This costs more in health services. Families who experience