

Katimavik program: The controversy, the mystery.

Monday, March 10, 1986

The Right Honourable Brian Mulroney
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa

Mr. Prime Minister,

Once again I am impelled to write to you and once again the subject is the underprivileged youth of our nation, their potential, the lack of meaningful options available to them and your government's seeming indifference to their tragic plight.

It was I (along, I know, with thousands of others) who implored you to reverse the Secretary of State's decision to cancel the Katimavik program which has, for almost a decade, served as a flagship of hope in the sea of despair that is engulfing our young people.

Since that brutal decision by your government, I have traveled to our provincial capitals and main cities, promoting the findings and recommendations of the Report of the Senate Committee on Youth. I have been interviewed by well over a hundred interested media people

from coast to coast. Everywhere the reaction is the same. Where is the compassion of a government that, in the face of the overwhelming evidence and personal testimony unearthed by the Senate committee and other committees and task forces (such as that chaired by Howard McCurdy of the NDP, describing a generation of youth without work, without options, without hope) has the audacity to bring down a budget that insults the young people of Canada by reiterating its decision to cancel the internationally heralded program Katimavik, to destroy the Department of Youth by stripping away its budget... and offering youth nothing to replace it?

I am ashamed for you, Mr. Prime Minister.

I have, I feel, done my duty as a citizen and a Senator. My colleagues and I have collected evidence illustrating the magnitude of the problem throughout the deliberations of our committee. We have presented our recommendations.

The Friends of Katimavik and thousands of citizens have expressed their outrage over



your treatment of that program and youth in general.

I have extended to you the benefit of the doubt by waiting to see what new hope or new programs you might have made available for Canadian youth in your budget. You have none!

I was even prepared to await in good faith the findings of your Youth Minister's national Consultative Conference. But you removed her budget, thereby relegating the Department of Youth into an obscurity that I now fear you are extending to that large segment

of Canadian youth that has become known as the Lost Generation.

We cannot let you do it! We will not let you do it!

Having exhausted all the usual democratic methods of impressing upon your government the state of crisis that exists in regards to youth, after lobbying tirelessly, but to no avail, for the reinstatement of Katimavik, I have lost confidence in your government's good will and seriousness toward this problem.

You have refused to act, so now we must act!

And my personal action, Mr. Prime Minister, should not be interpreted as anything but the expression of the deep concern felt by a desperate citizen who happens to serve as a Senator.

As of Monday, March 10, at 12:00 noon, I will embark on a hunger strike. I will do this at my place of work, namely the Senate. I will continue to do so until you and your government act in such a way as to restore my faith in your intention to effect positive change on the present and future lives of Canadian youth.

How can you do this? The Senate Committee recommendations were numerous and clear. The NDP Task Force offers several interesting and innovative options. An then, there is Katimavik.

Perhaps more than any other gesture, a decision by your government to resume funding that program would signal a new sensitivity and awareness towards youth and inject new hope into a generation in despair. It would also persuade me to abandon my personal protest and recommit my efforts toward indentifying and implementing new and meaningful options for youth.

Mr. Prime Minister, my goal is not to embarrass you or your government, although that will likely be a result. Nor do I wish to ruin my health even though I accept that possibility.

Simply, I wish by my action to bring to full light the plight of the hundreds of thousands of young people who languish in despair and bitterness, snubbed by a government who cancels their main youth program, thereby saying, "We don't want you to work, we won't let you work, not even for one dollar a day, the 'salary' paid to Katimavik participants!"

Please consider my views seriously. I am always available for discussion on this topic and, for an indefinite period of time, I will be easy to find, night or day, at work in the hall of the Senate or in the Chamber.

Yours sincerely,
Senator Jacques Hébert, O.C.
President and Founder of
Katimavik

The next rotation oriented its goals a little differently than most Katimavik endeavors, in Hearst, Ontario. Lisa found herself as a teachers aid with French speaking kids.

Arising out of these tasks were the realization that she did have teaching abilities and enjoyed them. With that came the emergence of a new Lisa Roenspiess; one that overcame her shyness and self-doubts.

The closing rotation of Lisa's Katimavik found her in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where she and her group hooked up with the "Good Sort Shop." This entailed her assisting members of the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded in gathering recyclables along the street curbs. She admits she was shocked when told of the job and although there was complaining just about every day, it never left the members.

Lisa left Katimavik with the belief that no matter what the future might heap upon her in regards to jobs, she'll be able to tough it out.

As well her heightened sense of self dependence will assist her in any moves toward living on her own and with those future employers who will mark her on her ability to take initiatives.

This article will not inform the 20,000 former participants of Katimavik, the Youth Senate Committee chaired by Senator Hébert, or anyone of the communities that were privileged enough to have the program members enter their lives.

They all recognized its merits; the Special Senate Committee on Youth, assigned by the government to review the youths plights. Their response was this...

"the Committee proposes that the government establish a Young Canadians Community Service Program, open to all Canadians aged 17 to 24, either by using Katimavik as a model or giving Katimavik, now a non-government organization funded by the Department of the Secretary of State, the means to expand."



With this the 37th day after its controversial slaying, Katimavik has done everything but rest in peace. The ten year program has generated thousands of letters and petitions to the government, protesting their cutting of the award winning effort that had provided 20,000 Canadian youths the opportunity to develop job skills, self-confidence, ethnic and social empathy with an awareness and understanding of the cultural mosaic that exists in this country.

These however have all been said before, with little credence being lent to any of them. Furthermore, while documentation on the protests are abundant, information regarding the Katimavik program itself is scarce. This has led people to become frustrated and embittered. They are being asked to cast a moral judgement, without proper material from which to construct an informed decision on.

Recipient of the U.N. Environmental Program medal, Katimavik aimed primarily at the 20-25 % of the youth who were more or less directionless, and gave them a rope from which to cling. Out of the mire of 700,000 unemployed youth, three former participants describe what they went through when travelling with the aforesaid program.

Every participant travels in a group of twelve to three different sites in Canada. At each site they must work for three months, at a wage of one dollar per day, with the agreement that if they complete the nine month program successfully, they will receive an honourarium of \$1000.

Jeff Murray, now a UNB student, chose back in 1982 to take part in such an effort.

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, was the location of the first rotation for Jeff's group, where they worked as assistants to people in a transition house. Entailing headstart programs for kids; French programs; and senior citizens homes; Jeff admitted the experience was exhausting but thinks he's a better person for it.

Not knowing what to expect, Jeff also admits he had his eyes opened when he witnessed the results of both wife and child battering. This cold introduction to the reality of this world served as a launching board for his efforts in peace groups and fund raising events.

From a small well populated city, the group travelled to Cowichan Lake in British Columbia where they found themselves cleaning walking areas and cleaning up schools. The fruits of Jeff's labours did not go unrewarded, as they finished their work early and were allowed to enjoy a six day canoe trip up North.

In efforts such as this, tangible benefits to the participants are not always there, but Jeff feels strongly that by his own actions was able to show others the value of work. And with that he enjoyed a part of this country he knows he would never have had the opportunity to experience.

FACT SHEET

1986 is Katimavik's 10th year - in the last 5 years alone, 178,751 weeks of volunteer labour have been donated.

Approximately 1,500 projects have been completed in 1,250 communities with 3,860 sponsors.

As well, two million trees were planted in conjunction with the UN Tree Project during IYY in 1985.

88% of sponsors evaluated quality of work, level of technical knowledge and motivation of participants as good to excellent

20,000 participants have benefited from the program with only an approximate 8% of request for participation able to be filled.

Budget was \$19.7 million from Secretary of State but public investment was offset



by program's financial return to the economy.

Example: in 1984-85, 26% of budget was equalled by direct community service by participants while 18% of

budget was matched directly by sponsors for materials and equipment.

For each federal dollar invested 35¢ was spent locally. For each dollar disbursed

by Katimavik and sponsors, \$21.43 was generated in production value.

Gallup Poll of April '85 showed that 50% of respondents feel that funding for Katimavik should be increased while 39.2% feel that, at least, funding should not be reduced.

Katimavik has joint ventures with the California Conservation Corps, Canadian Crossroads International, Canada World Youth, Canadian Bureau of International Education and Quebec's Office Franco-Quebecois.

Katimavik has served as a model for programs in New York City, Australia and Great Britain.

Katimavik was awarded the UN Environmental Program medal in 1985.

The final rotation saw the group swing back east again, where they arrived at a summer camp area in Lac St. Joseph, Quebec. Strangely enough, out of renovating buildings, cutting wood, and repairing water equipment, Jeff developed a strong empathy towards the plights of the French (i.e. Bill 101). As well he notes that to feel like a foreigner in ones own country was a good feeling indeed.

Jeff Murray, a person who by his own admission was directionless, has now focused on law with his education. Furthermore he approaches life with an entirely different attitude. Being an introvert before, he enjoys not being afraid to state his opinion.

The experience has opened doors for him by opening his mind.

Blaine Lake, Saskatchewan was the location where Lisa Roenspiess began her experience with Katimavik. With a bit of a jolt she partook in three months of construction work, painting, grass cutting, hedgework, assisting with swim instruction and a teachers aid.

Lisa admits that she would not endeavour to do such things again, but she did enjoy gaining the experience.