

LAST WORD

The Centre for Human Rights: A Distinctive Vision?

Tiananmen Square, Timisoara and San Salvador. Every night, TV images of atrocities suffered by people fighting injustice invade our living rooms. But there seems little we can do and our anger gives way to a sense of impotence.

We look to our leaders. The government now says "human rights are a fundamental and integral part of Canada's foreign policy." It has created an International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, to be based in Montreal and funded from an already stretched foreign aid budget to the tune of \$15 million over its first five years. The mandate is to help strengthen democratic institutions and promote human rights in Third World countries. Scepticism and optimism are both justified.

Human rights is an issue where government double standards are soon exposed. Canada's record is better than some but there is still more rhetoric than substance. Where risks are few — in Haiti or the Sudan — Canada has spoken out against abuses. But where the waters are muddied by geopolitical or commercial interests — in Central America, Indonesia or The Philippines — official Ottawa is prone to silence. Now the Canadian International Development Agency talks of tying Canadian aid to structural adjustment, which some argue hurts the very people the Centre intends to help. The left hand either does not know what the right is doing, or else the Centre is cosmetic surgery for hard-nosed policies.

Sceptics have some legitimate reservations about the Centre. How will it remain independent when it is funded by the government? Can it risk biting the hand that feeds it? Then there is the question of its budget, a drop in the bucket. With approximately 130 countries to choose from, how can the Centre effectively combat social injustice? Others fear that promotion of democracy smacks of United States ideological myopia, where elections and a multi-party system are all that matter and inequality and oppression, which are the roots of political violence, remain intact. If the Centre peddles U.S.-style democracy, it may be in for some dubious adventures — like propping up Central American facade democracies.

Centre a Possible Catalyst for Change

A little scepticism safeguards against naive policies and self-congratulation. But it is rash to dismiss the Centre outright. It could catalyze a creative Canadian policy on international human rights if it remains independent and takes a broad view of the world.

There are grounds for optimism. First, the appointment of former New Democratic Party leader Ed Broadbent as the Centre's first president was politically astute. The Centre risks being identified too closely with the government, but Mr. Broadbent's record as a social democrat makes him ideally suited to preserve the Centre's independence and, on occasion, to criticize the government.

Second, the Centre was created because *people* matter. Recent events in Eastern Europe, Latin America and parts of Asia and Africa are compelling proof that "people power" works. The Centre's trifling budget but it is not for underwriting megaprojects. It is for helping people to help themselves. Small sums are often enough to help a labour union, a legal aid group or a newspaper to survive as a critic of questionable state policies. But the Centre will need to go beyond the traditional Western tendency to equate human rights with civil liberties, elections and a multi-party system. These virtues are not enough to meet the needs of those who lack life's basics. Human rights also are meant to ensure that the poor have work, land, food, clothing, shelter, education and health care. Many Third World political struggles centre on redressing *material* inequality.

Human rights, social justice and democratic development are links in a chain. The heart of democracy is political participation and the essence of human rights is control of one's destiny. In much of the Third World, democracy and human rights, which are taken for granted here, are a call to arms that is subversive of the status quo. The circle is thus complete when social injustice drives ordinary people to stand up for their rights and to organize politically.

President Will Face Tough Decisions

With Mr. Broadbent in charge, there is good reason to believe that the Centre will take this broad view of human rights as its *raison d'être*, helping Third World grassroots activists who daily risk their lives challenging brutality and injustice, and giving a distinctive vision to our Official Development Assistance (ODA).

It will not be easy. Because human rights and democracy are a call to arms in much of the Third World, the Centre will face opposition at home and abroad. This will sometimes make for tough decisions. Should the Centre support a human rights group or union that has been deemed subversive by a Third World regime? Will its presence in a particular country upset normally smooth Canadian bilateral relations? How will it balance a commitment to human rights with funding a Third World movement that opposes state injustice but itself condones and even uses political violence?

Will the Centre remain solely a funding agency or will it also offer policy advice? The government tends to hold the door to foreign policy gestation firmly shut. It has rejected calls for a Human Rights Advisory Committee, for an index to measure the human rights performance of recipients of Canadian ODA, and for an annual parliamentary review of the human rights record of its main development partners. As a critic of government policy, the Centre could help to pry open that door. Like human rights institutes in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, it could conduct an annual review of the human rights records of aid recipients. Such reports are crucial reference points in Dutch and Nordic debates on aid and human rights and could expose any double standards.

Balancing advice and advocacy, or innovation and unacceptable risk, will take time and experience. But if the Centre puts social justice and people power at the heart of its activities, if it takes risks to support "first line of defence" organizations, and if its leadership is innovative and constructive, it will become world-class.

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