

Allocution

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**Searching for new Liberalism:
Community development and regional equity**

**National Youth Service in Canada:
In search of a strong national policy**

**St Mary's University
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Halifax, Nova Scotia**

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Seule la version prononcée fait foi

Thank you very much Tom for your kind words

Dear friends - good evening ! - Bonsoir! distingués invités!

Today, a group of us spent the day talking about some important issues – Issues about community development and regional equality – what has worked & what has not!

We talked about knowledge based competitiveness and the changing face of the Canadian economy generally – and – the Atlantic economy specifically.

We exchanged ideas on what we can do to ensure a more healthy, sustainable, learning and innovative future.

We also talked about «capital» - equitable distribution and investment of:

- venture capital
- social capital
- and «human» capital

Much of our discussions revolved around the idea of – creating equal opportunities – in all regions of Canada for the new economy.

My particular focus this evening – is about the need for creating equal and strategic opportunities – for youth in Canada.

I do have written remarks for my address this evening – however, before I get to it – I would like to put a few questions to you – for your consideration.

Tom has invited me to speak this evening on the topic of a «national youth strategy» - what would be the relevance of such a policy – and what would be its framework?

Specifically – how can we engage youth in community development – how can we create a «space» for youth to actively participate in the community and economic development process?

How can we empower Canadian youth to make a contribution in their respective communities – and – become true stakeholders in designing the community of the future?

I strongly believe that part of that answer is – to encourage our youth to be fully engaged in the political and social processes! We need to find ways to:

- promote civic engagement and civic responsibility at an early age
- develop effective strategies to engaging youth in the voluntary sector
- provide on-going opportunities for leadership development through volunteerism while contributing legitimately to the community.

Il y a 25 ans, le gouvernement fédéral libéral – sous la tutelle du Premier Ministre Pierre Trudeau – mettait sur pied un programme novateur axé sur le volontariat et la formation des jeunes!

25 years ago, the Liberal federal government – under then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau – created an innovative national youth service program: Katimavik.

Au fil des ans, Katimavik est devenu une vitrine sans égale sur l'entraide, la générosité, le partage et l'esprit de corps. – Il s'est aussi avéré un tremplin sans précédent pour l'insertion pleine et entière de notre jeunesse dans la société.

Over the years, more than 40 countries have emulated similar youth service programs – as well as creating a «global» youth service movement: the International Association of National Youth Service!

All these countries advocate similar benefits: – civic engagement – personal growth of its participants, who feel that they have found meaning and a sense of belonging in society, while performing useful community service. Numerous studies world-wide have confirmed the broad based impact of national youth service – as a rite of passage to adulthood, a training ground for building good citizens – and – national unity – as well as a way to facilitate the transition from school to work, providing personal and professional opportunities needed to complement the years of formal classroom education.

In Canada – over 22,000 thousand of our young people have been able to achieve their full potential – through Katimavik – Canada's own version of a national youth service program – in the process, acquiring priceless life experiences and, above all, restoring their ability to dream, to dare and – to act.

The International Association for National Youth Service (IANYS) was established in 1996 to stimulate and facilitate the exchange of information about the many benefits of National Youth Service (NYS).

This Association is pro-active. It recommends that every country consider National Youth Service as a mean to promote social cohesion and civic engagement amongst young people! It also recommends that NYS become a matter of government policy.

What exactly is National Youth Service?

National Youth Service (NYS) is defined as an organized activity in which young people serve others – and the environment in ways that contribute positively to society. NYS participants normally serve full-time for a period of six months to two years and receive support – whether from NGOs or government – sufficient enough to enable them to serve. Major areas of service are health, education, environmental conservation and care for the very old and the very young.

NYS also embraces service learning, where students utilize their education to serve others and then reflect on their service experiences to inform others of their learning. Service learning is a graduation requirement in many Universities around the world. Service learning in secondary schools and Universities is often a prelude to full-time NYS.

NYS programs have various names such as Community Service Volunteers in the United Kingdom, Zivildienst in Germany, Ameri Corps in the USA, the Green Corps in Australia, the National Youth Service Corps in Nigeria and Katimavik here – in Canada. Service learning is developed in universities and schools in the USA, Argentina, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany and others.

Countries initiate NYS programs for various reasons, including the delivery of social and environmental services, the alleviation of youth unemployment, as an alternative to required military service, as an experiential complement to improve classroom education, and as a form of nation building.

National Youth Service is a true form of «civic service».

Civic service being defined as “an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to participants.” In that sense, it is different from informal volunteerism. Service roles are created and filled, much like labour market positions.

Admittedly, the concept of «service» is sometimes difficult to pin down. This was one of the major challenges at a global Conference on Youth Service as a Strong Policy, held in Buenos Aires in year 2000. The word has a different meaning in different cultures!

Allow me to quote an American academic by the name of Micheal Sherraden – who actively participated in writing the legislation that led to the creation of one of the largest and most comprehensive civic service program in the world – AmeriCorps in the United States! This program was introduced by then President Bill Clinton and recently received increased support by the current President Bush. Ironically, AmeriCorps was inspired by Canada’s version of a NYS – Katimavik.

Micheal Sherraden is the author of several books and co-founder of the Global Service Institute (GSI), a global partnership and network whose mission is “to improve the knowledge base, information, and practice of civic service around the world.” Katimavik is a GSI resource partner. Sherraden was a key note speaker at a «national youth service conference» organized by Katimavik last November – and at which time Prime Minister Chrétien attended the evening gala celebrations – highlighting Katimavik’s 25th anniversary!

Sherraden describes civic service as an “emerging institution.” It is beginning to take hold in many countries. In fact, more than 50 countries now have a civic service program in place. For the most part, he said, it began in the 20th century, primarily in the last 20 years, and it is a much newer development than military service. Sherraden believes that, while this movement still involves a relatively small number of participants — one or two million worldwide — all the signs show that it is likely to continue growing.

Most civic service programs are for youth and young adults, although adult and especially elder service programs are growing, as older people find they are still energetic enough to contribute when they retire.

In describing the various forms of civic service, Sherraden noted that most civic service is organized at the national level, as in the case of Katimavik. Also expanding are international service (Canada World Youth or the U.S. Peace Corps, for example); transnational service (like the European Union’s service program or the North American Community Service Project); and local service, such as State Conservation Corps or City Conservation Corps in the United States.

In countries like Nigeria or Mexico, university graduates are required to give a year or two of service back to the country in return for their education. In other places, civic service provides an alternative to military service.

Sherraden cited Germany as an example of this, saying this approach was being considered in many countries, including Israel. There are also small service programs in some countries, he noted, mentioning Katimavik in Canada, Servicio Pais in Chile and Green Corps in Australia.

“What do we really know ?” We know that most people think that service is worthwhile, that research has been limited so far, and that it has focussed primarily on the impacts on the “server,” which have been identified as mostly positive. Finally, we know that more research is needed on impacts on the “served” and on society as a whole.

Referring to a paper he wrote on “Service as a Strong Policy,” Sherraden reported that service promotes individual action. Governments do not do all things well, he noted, but they are essential for creating frameworks for people to act, and for creating opportunities for individuals. Service is also likely to have many positive impacts, noting that these two attributes of service are “ideal characteristics of government policy.” He listed some of the positive outcomes of civic service:

- Cultural integration and citizenship
- Social and economic development
- Personal development and labour market opportunities
- Conflict resolution and international understanding.

Sherraden shared his vision for civic service in society: “One day, it will be as valued, respected, and rewarded as military service, and therefore as well funded”, he said. “One day, a period of civic service will be viewed as an ordinary and expected part of one’s life, like education and employment today. One day soon, a U.S. president will again understand that “security” cannot be won solely by barriers and protections, but also by sharing resources, understanding and mutual respect”. Quoting former senator Jacques Hébert’s words from a speech he gave at the same conference in Ottawa last November - he reminded participants that “Canada will not lead the world by inspiring fear. It can lead the world by inspiring generosity, compassion, and social development through civic service”.

Mr. Sherraden also endorsed the idea for Canada to pass legislation that will put Katimavik and «national youth service» - on a sound policy footing,” with stable federal budget support, like Americorps in the U.S. He felt that Katimavik should not aim for incremental growth, but for exponential growth, to 20 or more times its current size, which would make it more comparable to the US Civilian Conservation Corps.

“What if 10 per cent of the Canadian defence budget was spent for civic service”, he asked. “What if a period of service learning was required for all university graduates in Canada?

What if Katimavik was assigned to tackle a major national goal such as building a bicycle trail across Canada, providing literacy education or in-home care for the elderly, doing HIV/AIDS prevention work or organizing disaster response?”

Taking on major challenges would help gain credibility as well as visibility, and ensure its future growth, Sherraden concluded.

In Canada – Katimavik has recently redesigned its training strategies and adopted the model known internationally as “service learning”. A socio-educational program – predicated on community involvement through volunteer work.

Our strategies in the last three years have been to strengthen our educational capabilities and – improve our organizational performance.

More than ever, we are guiding young people toward rewarding experiences that will allow them to:

- Acquire hands-on leadership skills
- Learn the other official language;
- Discover the richness of our cultural diversity
- Become active citizens in protecting the environment
- Adopt a more healthy lifestyle
- And acquire a desire for continued civic engagement – as a life long endeavour!

Katimavik is dedicated to meeting the ever-growing demands of young Canadians. For example, in 2001, in response to a modest recruitment campaign – 726 places were filled.

This resulted in over 450 000 hours of volunteer efforts to 66 host «rural» communities across Canada. These projects were all accomplished in partnership with over 400 community organisations!

For the past three years or so – we received nearly 7,000 applications annually. This is a strong and positive indication – that our youth want to take on the challenge of volunteer service! They want to make a difference – a real difference!

Participating in Katimavik represents a «commitment» of up to nine months of continued group living – with 10 other young people from all walks of life and from all regions – each participant will work on average 30 hours a week on community projects – in three different regions of Canada!

L'impact économique total pour l'année 2001-2002 – a été estimé à pas moins de 17 millions de dollars.

De plus, chaque dollar investi dans le programme a permis à la société canadienne de bénéficier d'un retour de 1,49\$. For every dollar invested in the program there is a return of 1.49\$!

Here is only a sample of the results emanating for the surveys conducted amongst both our young people and our community partners, published in a recent social and economic impact study:

- **95% of participants find that they are more employable – because of the skills they acquired through Katimavik;**
- **92% of partner organizations say Katimavik’s young volunteers - helped to enhance the quality of services available in the communities they served;**
- **and almost 70% of the young people surveyed – say their Katimavik experience had a very positive impact on their career plans.**

National youth service – remains an incredible means – for improving young people’s career opportunities – and putting them on the road to success, accomplishment – and mutual support.

Un programme jeunesse national de volontariat demeure - sans l’ombre d’un doute - un investissement social de premier ordre – qui contribue à raffermir l’unité nationale.

Since Katimavik’s creation 25 years ago, 22,000 young people have participated in the program and 2,000 communities have benefited from it. Every year, each participant will contribute 500 hours of volunteer service – on average!

Katimavik wishes to go further and help Canadians to understand how participating in civic service constitutes an extraordinary opportunity for our youth to develop their skills. Such activities should be supported by a National Youth Policy.

In 2000, youth volunteers accounted for 15 per cent of the total number of volunteer hours in Canada. Many young people say they do not volunteer because they do not know how to go about it. It is our collective duty to create and provide the right kind of opportunities to engage youth in a meaningful and enriching volunteer experience. A «youth engagement» strategy would also help to address current concerns about youth employability – and – would be a good long term investment for the voluntary sector as a whole.

There are more than one billion youth between 15 and 24 years old worldwide. However, the youth population is in decline here in Canada, and this means that this segment of the population will have “unbelievable opportunities” over the next decades.

In a recent national survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participation, it is demonstrated that youth do see the advantages of volunteering as a means of improving job opportunities and learning skills that will make them more employable.

A study by Ekos Research also showed that the voluntary sector enjoys the highest level of trust amongst the public of any sector. It would be a good time to develop effective recruitment and development opportunities for youth!

“So what does all this information really mean?”

There is a «lack of a coherent framework » for engaging youth in designing the future.

Here are some elements of a policy framework that would set the stage for meaningful change. The first step should be to find ways to attract youth to the voluntary sectors, as volunteers or as donors. The second would be to use a “youth lense” for policy development, something that has worked well for women and Aboriginals in Canada!

I cannot stress enough the importance of sustainable resourcing for youth and youth serving organizations that encourage career paths for youth, specialized training and a focus on youth volunteerism. We need serious investments in technology, so that our «youth» can make a valuable contribution in this area. The final element needed is the development and testing of new models to engage youth in consultative and decision-making processes.

Canada’s youth need and deserve an opportunity to engage their creativity & their learning at the community level – developing not only important social and professional skills – but also – discovering themselves and their sense of civic responsibility in the process. A strong «national youth service policy» would provide the right framework and provide our youth with important alternatives and legitimate options!

National youth service – is definitely a good social investment!

Jean-Guy Bigeau
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