

Excerpts

Gerry Barr's speech at the Annual General Meeting of CCIC held on May 27-28, 2010.

... These are uniquely precarious times.

At the end of November KAIROS got word that its funding from CIDA had come to an end.

The word was informally delivered – no letter, no considered set of reasons, just a phone call. But it had a sort of executive craziness about it that was persuasive. KAIROS – it appeared – was not judged to be a sufficient “fit” for program funding.

The “fit” in question – it turned out (when the Minister finally put it on paper) was with the new Agency priorities – those of 1) children and youth 2) food security and 3) sustainable economic growth.

You might think that this – on its face – is plausible. But, then, you might also want to notice that the guidelines (for example) for children and youth finally made it onto the CIDA web-site only this month.

The themes had been consulted by CIDA in August. I know because I was at those consultations. And this matters when one notices that KAIROS proposal for renewal (of support for next three years) had been submitted in June long before CIDA commenced its reflections on what were to putatively to become the new standard of relevance. So for KAIROS it was a classic example of moving the goal posts after the play had started.

It is also worth a note (one that matters to everyone in this room) that in the context of Partnership Branch - and CIDA's responsive program- judgments about the final merits of proposals have not before been made on the basis of these emergent thematic areas of focus. Why? Because, as the Auditor General noted in her Fall report, these sorts of themes have been re-shuffled five times in the last 10 years – at least a dozen different themes in all. So how can you judge the merits of a multi-year programming proposal on the strength of themes which may have a half life of six months. It's like planning next year's crop on the strength of this afternoon's weather.

Well, Mr. Kenny cleared it all up for us didn't he – with his speech in Jerusalem when he wrongly identified KAIROS as a prominent advocate of a strategy of boycott disinvestment and sanctions against Israel. Mr. Kenney said that the Government of Canada had a policy of zero tolerance when it comes to anti Semitism and that – in the result – KAIROS had been defunded.

And there you have it. A distinguished partner organization at CIDA with its funding prospects extinguished. First, for no reasons that could be named. Then, for implausible reasons and on the strength of a logic never before relied on. Finally for the worst reasons of all – when partisanship trumps development and standards are just... put out the door.

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... We have seen some bad trends. Today, you can see the emergence of a kind of partisan brush clearing exercise and a punishment approach adopted towards those whose public views run at cross purposes to the government.

The Canadian Council on Social Development has been stripped of its resources. The Council had supported a distinguished Ottawa secretariat for many of Canada's Social Planning Councils (and other agencies in the social service sector) and it was a moving force behind the establishment of Canada's Unemployment Insurance Program.

Within the last month the Government has shut down support to 14 women's groups across the country. One of them is MATCH – the only non-governmental organization in Canada exclusively focused on the rights and circumstances of women in the developing world.

There was also the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, the New Brunswick Pay Equity Coalition, the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women... and others.

Experienced watchers will know that this is all "of a piece" with earlier moves when the National Association of Women Lawyers had its advocacy work defunded.

Canada's Court Challenges program is discontinued – cutting off one of the most important avenues by which Charter of Rights court cases can be pursued for many of the most marginalized people in Canadian society.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission has been hit with such severe financial restraint that it has closed down its main offices in Toronto and Vancouver and Halifax (accounting for about 70 percent of its case load).

If you are a Public Commissioner charged with reviewing and reporting on the public business you had better watch your words. The last Military Police Complaints Commissioner got the ax as did the head of the Nuclear Safety Commission.

Richard Colvin remains one of the main examples. Reporting what a majority of Canadians now believe to be plainly obvious this distinguished senior envoy was portrayed, in Parliament, as a rogue diplomat and a gullible dupe of the Taliban.

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... I know many parliamentarians – some of them have been premiers or prime ministers or have helped to run the offices of prime ministers. And I think I can tell you for sure than none of them ever felt – in office – that their efforts were adequately appreciated by civil society. There just is something about that relationship with third-party validators that is structurally unsatisfying from the point of view of government. Civil society advocates can never resist adding the ‘but’ to the congratulations message....congratulations prime minister ‘but’.... Good job Premier, but...

Nevertheless, those governments have always – even though they ground their teeth – supported the role of civil society. They have supported programs which helped to give voice (however modest) to marginalized groups because they also believed that the “*brassage d’idees*” gave strength to the policy process.

The public trading of ideas and the contestation of ideas and alternative views is good for public policy and it is good for us all.

This government, however, looks like it is on another track – and if it keeps up– we’ll all be the worse off for it.

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... The Council’s proposal for funding renewal has – after 8 months – gone into overtime at CIDA and I’ve got to say, it’s looking grim.

We rely, of course, very heavily on Government of Canada resources at the Secretariat. In that respect our Sector it is very much like our counterparts in the United States or France or the UK where support for the main national platforms of Civil Society is seen as integral to building up citizen involvement in international cooperation.

But that is elsewhere. That is in other donor states. And it looks as if change may be coming in Canada.

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... At CIDA, the Council's proposal has fallen into a kind of institutional void.

Our program year runs until the end of March – so we were at that decision at the end of the month.

But there was no decision - instead a three and a half month funded extension (until July 15th.) while CIDA (formally) continues its review.

This is not the first time the Council has been over extended – but those other moments have been marked by active discussion between us and about what change would make approval more in prospect – you know the kind of discussion you have when there is a partner relationship. Unhappily that is not going on today.

So we have concluded that we have to take the prospect of de-funding seriously.

It means taking all those steps which anticipate a future that does not include CIDA funding.

We have given notice of possible layoff to roughly two thirds of our staff team. Those colleagues who were with us on temporary contracts have not had their contracts renewed.

We are doing all that we must do to manage ourselves so that the Council could function albeit with resources roughly 1/3 of former levels.

And we are meeting our obligations and bearing the costs of severance payments as members of the staff team opt to leave and search for work – electing severance over recall.

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... Even if CIDA were to decide to accept our program proposal going forward we would have to rebuild the staff of the Secretariat and we would have shed almost 400,000 from the Council's reserve funds.

I don't think that I have to underscore, or emphasize, how pernicious this is. The "overtime" extensions create process overhangs which eat away at reserves and decimate capacity. It all displays an inattention to the responsibilities of partnership which is breathtaking.

Two years ago the outgoing President of CIDA spoke about the “essential role” played by CCIC. He described the Council as a “long standing partner” and a “truly priority partner” for CIDA. The Council has not changed – but it looks as if there may now be change at CIDA.

Planning for a future in which there are radically diminished financial resources will need imagination and knowledge.

The weight and impact of the Council has always come from positioning and synergy – from the convening of members and the leveraging of resources. And that will be true in the future.

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... The good news is this when it comes to CCIC.

At the Board and the Secretariat I think I can say that we have thought about it long enough, and hard enough, and in sufficient detail to know that we can be cut we cannot be removed.

We are pretty sure we can find a way through. And our contingency plans now imagine a future that relies on:

- a more activist board and engaged members
- maintaining the convening capacity of the Council (when it comes to for example to working groups)
- keeping up our regular analysis on Canadian aid, and the ODA file
- holding on to the Council’s advocacy and public communications role as well as member services like the Code of Ethics.

It will take commitment and it will take money. We will not be able to do those things without some fundraising and some imagination and some willingness to pool resources and to support each other.

But it can be done. We need to put our minds to it. Think about the resources that we have – about the social capital that we have build through all these years. It can be done.

We are here to talk about citizen action in challenging times and our experiences tell us that we are not just making this stuff up. Our analysis needs to be sharp and concise and our sense of our resources (as a sector) should be appreciative and wide ranging. We need to be clear and realistic and we also need to be optimistic and imaginative.

Our work is citizen action .Our work is also answering to the challenges arrayed around us. So here we are – in these difficult moments – called to be ourselves. Good luck to us all!