*1996 International Conference on Volunteer Administration*

# EXPLORATION OF PUBLIC ISSUES IN THE UNITED STATES, CANADA, AND BEYOND

## I.

ABSTRACT

*Volunteerism in Canada has grown out of an early history of citizen action supported, in post-World War II Canada, by the emergence of strong involvement by government in the voluntary sector. The resulting dependence on stable funding and directional management from provincial and federal governments has colored the nature of volunteerism in Canada. Faced in recent years with massive cutbacks and government-led reform, voluntary organizations have struggled to find their way in a "new" world. Volunteer centers, directors of volunteers, and volunteers themselves have been challenged to adapt. The Canadian voluntary sector is still struggling with the fall-out from change and faces many challenges heading into the next century.*

## Trends in Volunteerism: A Canadian Perspective

**Paddy Bowen**

In October 1996 I attended AVA's marvelous International Conference on Volunteer Administration in Calgary. Having started as executive director of Volunteer Canada some 10 months before, this was my first introduction to the lively and stimulating community of volunteers administrators. The mix of Canadians and Americans—with the odd Brit and New Zealander thrown in—made the experience even richer.

It has been said that Canada doesn't have a real culture of its own and that we borrow and adapt from our neighbors to the south and lean heavily on our British heritage. In fact, I think that a very particular character and culture has developed out of that mix. It is clearly reflected when we look at the voluntary sector in our country.

As in the United States, many voluntary organizations in Canada grew out of citizen action, originating in churches and synagogues, agriculture cooperatives, and community associations. However, somewhere in the World War II years both the federal and numerous provincial governments in Canada began to provide significant support to voluntary organizations. Canadians were very comfortable with the resulting model of services that combined government funding with charity/non-profit organizational delivery. One of the best known examples of this is Canada's health care system which to this day is virtually 100 percent funded by government and delivered by independent—although heavily regulated—hospitals.

Canada's voluntary sector quickly

---

*Paddy Bowen* is the executive director of Volunteer Canada: the Canadian Association of Volunteer Bureaux and Centres. Volunteer Canada is mandated to support and facilitate the work of volunteer centers in Canada and to promote volunteerism. The author is a social worker who has worked at the national level in home care and with disadvantaged youth for more than 10 years. She has also worked at the community level in social agencies including youth employment programs, facilities for special needs adults, and rehabilitation workshops.

became dependent on government funding and support. In some cases, the vagaries of politics and their bureaucracies were as responsible for the emergence of a new service as was community need. Again the hospital sector provides a good example: The province of Saskatchewan built more than 100 rural hospitals in the 20 years after World War II. Most of them were built for politically expedient reasons. People in Saskatchewan, however, soon grew attached to and proud of their hospital system. Other examples abound: youth employment programs, senior citizen resource centers, housing cooperatives—many of which have come and gone as successive governments flirted with various popular social issues. However, on the plus side, thousands of voluntary organizations benefited from government funding that often spanned many years.

The peculiar nature of the relationship that developed between government and the voluntary sector in Canada also affected the nature of volunteerism. Many volunteers worked in settings where funding was never an issue. Strong traditional organizations like the Red Cross, United Way, Canadian Cancer Society, and countless others benefited from the work of millions of volunteers. With few exceptions, Canadian communities didn't need or have volunteer centers, since government continued to provide the lead in the funding and even management of the voluntary sector.

Enter the 1980s when governments at all levels (federal, provincial, municipal) began to realize that somewhere along the way debts had piled up and they were in a fiscal deficit situation. Slowly the politics of growth and development were replaced with downsizing, cutbacks, reorganization, and reformation. Increasingly small "c" conservative governments were elected. In the late 1980s, in the largest province of the country (Ontario), the first-ever, fiscally conservative, socialist government took office under the New Democratic Party of Ontario. For many in the voluntary sector this signaled, in the most obvious way yet, that the "old" days were really gone, and that hunkering down and learning to survive was the object of the day.

Volunteer centers in Canada now began to appear in greater numbers than had been the case in the 1970s and early 1980s. As volunteerism grew into an acknowledged force for good, and as the need to manage and support volunteerism was gradually accepted, volunteer centers emerged as an ideal community-based counterpart to the work of directors of volunteers in various community settings. Unfortunately for many volunteer centers, the changes in government support came too soon for these new and burgeoning organizations. With a few notable exceptions, volunteer centers in Canada have struggled to find a niche in a terrain that is battle-scarred and reeling from repeated cuts and reforms.

As the very heart of the voluntary sector in Canada has been shaken by these massive changes, so has the spirit of volunteerism. New communities of volunteers have emerged to find little government support. The environmental movement, for example, built by the contributions of millions of volunteers, has received next to no government funding, and most environmental groups in Canada do not even have charitable status. Other "new" groups such as organizations working with people with AIDS or even food banks have been challenged from the outset to find dollar- and people-resources without the benefit of solid, core funding. The home care community in Canada has emerged at a time when hospitals and long-term care facilities are under severe scrutiny. It is baldly stated that no extra dollars are available in the health care system to support this "new" service—not new at all if we go back to where health care really began.

Volunteers in these emerging communities have been faced with a completely different set of challenges from those faced by their forerunners in the 1950s

and 1960s. Facing different and yet just as challenging changes are the volunteers and those who manage them in more traditional settings. As shortsighted as it may be, too many hospitals, long-term care facilities, municipalities, and sports and recreation organizations have chosen to cut volunteer management as an "unessential" service. Thousands of volunteers involved in leadership in the voluntary sector have found themselves coping with reductions, lay-offs, restructuring, and even organizational closings. Many have had to become full-time fund raisers rather than the trail blazing leaders they thought they would be.

Meanwhile, the volunteers themselves have been changing. The "new" volunteers are often immigrants who are seeking Canadian life and work experience as well as practice opportunities to learn their new language. Others are young people who know they will never get a job without something on their resumes. Even more challenging to the old mores are those who "volunteer" because they have to: in order to get a welfare check; in order to avoid going to prison; in order to graduate from college.

While I think many, if not all, of these trends are being experienced in other countries, Canada's voluntary sector seems to have lost its balance during these turbulent times. As one voluntary sector leader put it at a 1996 symposium in Toronto, having spent 25 years in bed with an elephant (government), we don't quite know what to do now that we have been kicked out—of bed that is. To make it even more disorienting, the elephant has encouraged us to get into bed with another large beast—the corporate sector.

Dependence on government has softened our edges and has made it unnecessary—at least until the last five years or so—to have skills in things like marketing, public relations, even fund raising. We have not, collectively, decided what to do about concepts such as working for welfare, mandatory service learning, or the role that volunteerism plays in a world without jobs. We need to develop new ways to engage, support, and mobilize the new volunteer. We have to face squarely some of the fundamental and irreversible changes to organizations we thought would never change. We have to learn to make our communities healthy and active in the face of severe economic reform. We have a lot of work to do.

I believe that as Canadians often do, in time we will learn to adapt our particular character and culture to the fall-out from all the changes and the complex and challenging needs of the new millennium. I know that we will continue to build one of the most active and productive volunteer work forces in the world and share in the pride of our truly blessed country.