

# **THE 2002 KUYPER LECTURE**

## **Response**

**By Harry J. Kits ©  
Citizens for Public Justice**

### **Christians Organizing for Political Service in Canada**

**In Response to  
Paul Freston's lecture**

**Christians Organizing for Public Service  
In Global Context**

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# Christians Organizing for Political Service in Canada

Harry J. Kits

## Introduction

First of all, thank you for the invitation to participate on this occasion. Allow me to bring greetings and congratulations from Citizens for Public Justice to the Center for Public Justice on the occasion of your 25th anniversary. CPJ-U.S. is entangled in the same roots as CPJ-Canada, including some direct links to something called the Christian Action Foundation, which developed in Edmonton, Alberta and was transplanted by Rev. Louis Tamminga to Sioux Center, Iowa in the 60s. CPJ-Canada, measuring back to those days, celebrates 40 years of institutional existence next year.

Thanks to Paul Freston for his fascinating analysis of Christian political involvement in the Third World, and his reminder to resist easy assumptions and categorizing of events and persons which we see in the news from countries in the Third World.

I'm pleased to speak for a few minutes about the Canadian scene. Canada is the proverbial mouse beside the elephant of the U.S., so it may be useful to use Canada as another comparative example of Christians organizing for political service. I am speaking primarily in the context of my own experience of nearly twenty years of direct observation and participation as a Christian in public life in Canada, fourteen of those years at CPJ-Canada.

I've divided my remarks as follows:

- A very brief overview of religion in Canada;
- A summary review of some of the approaches which Christians have used in Canada for political service;
- Then some challenges for continued service from the Canadian experience.

I think you will hear some echoes in the Canadian experience from Paul Freston's presentation.

## A very brief overview of religion in Canada

Canada's history is marked by a divide between Catholic Quebec and a Protestant ROC (Rest of Canada).<sup>1</sup> It is this fundamental shaping divide--which of course ignores the Native Canadian original inhabitants--which prevented persons of faith from identifying the "Kingdom of God" with Canada as a whole. The conversations and fighting between these Christian faiths, marked also by ethnic and provincial histories, has defined Christian participation in much of Canadian politics.

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<sup>1</sup> See William H. Katerberg "Consumers and Citizens: Religion, Identity and Politics in Canada and the United States" in *Rethinking Church, State and Modernity: Canada Between Europe and America*. Edited by David Lyon and Marguerite van Die. Toronto: U of T Press, 2000. Pp. 283-301.

There were also always counter voices from the Western provinces, often from more evangelical or prophetic voices. They contributed another voice not only to churches, but also to politics.

The 1960s, however, saw the “Quiet Revolution” in Quebec, characterized by the lessening overt role of the church in public life. Then, in the rest of Canada, we see a more secularized, liberal individualism taking over society. In addition, significantly increased immigration from non-European countries coloured the religious face of Canada.

Let’s jump now to more recent history. Pollsters tell us that from 1987 to today, the proportion of Canadians declaring that they have no religious affiliation have more than doubled from 12 percent to 26 percent. Those declaring themselves Protestant dropped from 32 percent in 1987, to 20 percent. Canada remains predominantly Roman Catholic, though, there too, we see a drop from 45 percent to 41 percent over the same time period. Those whose religion is “other,” according to the census used for these figures, rose from an almost negligible amount to 13 percent in 2000<sup>2</sup>. The city of Toronto where I live, for example, is now made up of more than 50 percent visible minorities from many different countries around the globe, and many with different religions.

While these figures could be seen to indicate a secularization of Canadian society, observers also point to an increase in those calling themselves evangelical. Additionally, they point out that “increasing numbers of Canadians ... espouse religious belief that is strongly personal and has minimal institutional embodiment.”<sup>3</sup>

Accompanying this is “evidence in a variety of domains that Canadians are decreasingly interested in accepting or utilizing formal organizations, preferring to set their own norms and to engage with others directly and on their own.”<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, according to a 1996 comparative poll, only 19 percent of Canadians say that religion is important to their political thinking, versus 41 percent of Americans.<sup>5</sup> There is continuing uncertainty about the public face of Christianity in Canada. By government order, there was to be no reference to Jesus at the public memorial service marking a 1998 plane crash in Peggy’s Cove, Nova Scotia. There was no religious language at the official memorial service in Ottawa, Canada’s capital, mourning the events of September 11, though the Prime Minister went to his Catholic parish afterwards. Yet there was a multi-faith service when the Queen visited Canada.

This is the context in which Christians have been active in political service.

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<sup>2</sup> Unpublished paper “Religion in Canada Today: A Brief Tour d’Horizon” by Paul B. Reed presented at the Conference, *Pluralism, Religion and Public Policy*, McGill University, Montreal. October 9-11, 2002, p. 2,3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 4. See also Reginald W. Bibby. *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Rae Correlli, “How very different we are,” *Macleans*, November 4, 1996, reference in Katerberg, “Consumers and Citizens,” p. 40.

## **Christians active in Canadian public life in recent decades**

Let me now move to highlight just a few of the ways in which Christians have been active in political life in Canada in recent decades.<sup>6</sup>

### **Church leaders, denominations**

“The church leaders,” as we call them, the mainline church leadership, have been very active in speaking out on public life in Canada. Whether on behalf of an individual denomination (such as the Moderator of the United Church of Canada, the largest Protestant denomination, or the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops speaking for the Roman Catholic church), or jointly and ecumenically through the Canadian Council of Churches, the church leaders have actively spoken out. The range of issues they have addressed includes the economy, world issues, Aboriginal rights, seven-day shopping, and others. Most recently they wrote a passionate letter urging caution from the Canadian government about endorsing an armed conflict in Iraq.

### **Interdenominational or trans-denominational organizations**

#### *Evangelical community*

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada is less an ecumenical grouping of church leaders than an interdenominational organization, represented by its staff and spokespersons. EFC started in 1964, but it was not until 1988 that it began to seriously address the government and courts as it does today. Its initial activities were in the context of supporting individual evangelicals active in Ottawa’s party politics and civil service. Later it became connected to the more Reformed activist tradition that I share. And while initially often in contradiction, it now occasionally acts in cooperation with the mainline church leaders. While EFC is known more for addressing abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, religious freedom and educational justice, it also addresses Aboriginal rights and poverty issues.

#### *Mainline churches – Kairos*

Another phenomenon among the mainline churches was the development, in the 1970s, of coalitions between various churches to do research, policy development work, advocacy to government and public education. Until recently there were 15 different coalitions involved in policy issues ranging from Latin America, Africa, China, economics, Aboriginal rights, to criminal justice and armed conflict.

In the last couple of years, most have joined together in a new ecumenical coalition called Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives. They have also, especially in the context of the Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative, a renewed emphasis on linking “theology” or biblical principles with their policy initiatives.

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<sup>6</sup> The following is primarily the author’s own observations and interpretation, but with reference to more details in John Stackhouse, Christian Groups Engage Canadian Politics Since the 1960s, in *Rethinking Church, State and Modernity*. Pp. 113-128.

### *Citizens for Public Justice - Canada*

CPJ-Canada formed in 1963 to address public policy issues. Initially those policies focussed on “rights for the Christian community,” where CPJ advocated a principled pluralism and right of association, to allow for choice of a religiously-based education or membership in a Christian labour union. This theme continues in a new way with advocacy for the place of religious social services in public life, for Aboriginal rights, and for the ability of a plurality of religious voices to participate in the public square. However, there is currently more focus on making a Christian contribution to issues of poverty, unemployment and refugee issues in Canada. We focus on research, public education and direct advocacy for policy change.

### *Others*

In addition, there are a number of smaller Christian groups in Canada, some of which call for a “restoration” of a Christian Canada, and others of which focus on specific policy issues.

### **Party politics**

Party politics in Canada generally sees Christian political service as behind-the-scenes only.

While most Canadian Prime Ministers in recent years have been Roman Catholic, to a varying degree of practice and articulation, very few politicians are overt about their faith or how it affects their policies. For some, their faith is well known, but isn't really spoken about much, (and if it is, often in a negative manner).

Preston Manning, the former leader of the Canadian Alliance party, came out of his evangelical closet more clearly only after leaving the party leadership. The style and actions of the next evangelical leader of the Canadian Alliance party, Stockwell Day, did more harm than good to the cause of someone being upfront about their faith in party politics.

We have also had a small struggling Christian Heritage Party since the mid-80s. It garners relatively few votes and currently, in fact, is not even a registered party because in the last election it could not nominate candidates in enough ridings. The party has been hampered by internal struggles around defining “Christian heritage,” by a poor sense of the nature and role of government, by lack of a broad acceptance among Christians, and by lack of a proportional representation electoral system which might enhance its electoral chances.

There are, however, many Christians in all of our political parties who are quite serious about applying basic faith principles of justice, compassion, and responsibility in the things which they advocate for within and through their parties.

### **Challenges and prospects for Christians organizing for political service**

Out of my Canadian experience then, let me address briefly the questions before us on the purpose and methods of Christian involvement in politics.

## Two framing perspectives

First two framing perspectives--these clearly reflect Freston's themes, which he used both as challenge and critique in the third world context. They apply similarly in my country.

1. *Principled pluralism.* This perspective is crucial for Christians' participation in public life. We must call for religious freedom for all, including freedom for religions other than our own. We must not only assert the right of expressions of religion in public life, but seek to ensure justice for all such expressions. Many Christians in Canada struggle with how this concept works itself out practically in a Canada uncomfortable with explicit religious expression in politics. Many newcomer religions, too, struggle with it.

2. *The public justice role of government.* We need to assert the importance of government and its call to public justice. Government, however, is not the be-all and end-all of our life together. We need to articulate the role of the state and, in that context, call for public policies that reflect that role. In my view, it is plain silly to be, on principle, in favour of small government or of big government. It is the public justice role of government which is crucial--the size and extent of government can ebb and flow within that criteria.

## Six brief reflections on methods:

1. We need to participate in every possible avenue, I would argue--with our faith upfront, to show the legitimacy of our participation. In order to achieve political change and achieve public justice, we need to be involved in political parties, through our church leaders, and through separate institutions and coalitions.

2. In order to be fully involved we need places of reflection. We need places where Christians can come together, out of these basic principles, and reflect on what that means for specific policies. Whether you are part of a political party, part of an ecumenical coalition, or another body that allows that room, you can draw on these resources for public life together.

3. We need to remain unpredictable. Paul Freston calls on us not to make easy assumptions about those in the South. Our challenge is to be unpredictable so people can't make easy assumptions about us. Think for example about the approach of the Seamless Garment Network (now Consistent-life.org), which seeks to protect life by opposing not only abortion, but also capital punishment and nuclear arms.

4. We should consider forming unusual alliances--it's related to the theme of being unpredictable. I'll mention two:

First: Canadian evangelical and mainline churches have come together on several issues, historically on opposing seven-day shopping and gambling, but more recently on a court case on patenting life forms, such as the Harvard cancer mouse. This working together has real political impact.

Second, try working multi-faith. We at CPJ have been actively involved in multi-faith coalitions on issues ranging from constitutional discussions in Canada in late 80s and early 90s, educational justice for faith-based schools, poverty in the province of Ontario, to speaking out at present about the plight of refugees unfairly treated by Canadian policy and regulations. We have worked with Aboriginal people, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews.

One of my own most satisfying moments was when a Muslim father and I could both affirm, in public statements to government, that our children couldn't take off their faith, like they took off their coats, when they entered the school doors. Together we could defend principled pluralism to allow each of us to live our faith publicly, side by side.

5. Form links around the world. An example for Canada was certainly the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative. In order to shape the debt forgiveness campaign in Canada at the turn of the millennium, CEJI invited partners from parts of the world affected by debt, and CEJI went to hear and visit those parts of the world, to understand the impact of our policy approach and the kind of problems, resentments and benefits which could result. It shaped the nature of our speaking up.

6. Citizen education. Reflection and involvement of a broad range of people is needed. I've been intrigued to see a change in youth who have been disaffected with their church or denomination--who reject the institutions, but not their faith. Some who have come and worked with us at CPJ have become more excited about their faith, because they have been able to apply it directly to public policy and those parts of public life about which they are concerned. We also need to be mindful of the ethnic and racial diversity among Christians, including in North America, which needs to shape the ways we work, and the people with whom we interact, as we carry out Christian political service.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate on this occasion. I look forward to the rest of this important discussion tonight and beyond.

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