

## Thought & Afterthought

André Carrel

Reports out of Nelson about citizens collecting money to finance a lawsuit against the provincial government to save their hospital services are a sad commentary on the state of politics, as are reports about Mayor Hendrixson of Wells being on a hunger strike to protest the closing of that community's school.

People are desperately hoping that Charter rights meant to protect the rights of citizens will be extended to protect policy values for society. Whether Nelson is entitled to local hospital services and whether Wells is entitled to have a local school is not a matter of rights; it is a matter of public policy, and when it comes to public policy, governments reign supreme.

This reality was stated succinctly in 1998 by the Court of Queen's Bench in New Brunswick, where a group of citizens had challenged the government's decision to amalgamate their municipality. The Court concluded that "there is no constitutional right of residents or electors to be consulted before the Legislature passes legislation" and that "it is not open to persons or groups of persons to usurp [the Legislature's] power or encroach upon it." In other words, individual rights notwithstanding, the POWER to make public policy decisions rests with the Legislature.

The effectiveness of after-the-fact public protests and civil disobedience is limited by sophisticated "spin doctor" public relations campaigns sponsored by governments. Governments unswayed by violent WTO protests in Seattle, Genoa and Québec City, and equally indifferent to peaceful protest marches by thousand of British Columbians in Victoria and Vancouver are unlikely to heed a 70-year old small-town Mayor. His hunger strike is unlikely to sway a government with the power and determination to implement an agenda.

If citizens want to influence public policies that affect their lives and their communities, they have to make personal involvement in politics a priority. This means dedicating a measure of time in their daily routine to political matters. The above-mentioned concerned citizens are doing that. The problem is that they are doing it after the fact when, to be effective, they and their neighbors should have been deciding beforehand what public policies they wanted to see adopted, and making their values crystal

clear to elected officials (or better yet, to candidates seeking election).

We need to recognize that going to court, going on a hunger strike, or participating in spectacular protests to force governments to reverse decisions are after-the-fact actions that place governments in a defensive position. Such actions call for winners and losers, and nobody likes to be a loser. Since it is citizens, not governments, who live with the financial, social, environmental and political consequences of public policy decisions, it stands to reason that citizens ought to discuss and debate public policy matters and values before they elect representatives to do the job. How can citizens expect to hold their governments accountable without first defining community values? The place to start a political discourse on values is the community. Debating policy needs to be learned, and the best place to learn is at home. Now is a good time to start developing a healthy and democratic "political matters matter" attitude.

Local government elections - municipal, regional district, and school board - are only three months away. What public policy issues and values should shape these elections? The answers to these questions should not be proclaimed by candidates a few weeks before polling day. They should come from citizens. Now is the time to start talking not about the personality of potential candidates, but about politics at the local level. Now is the time to focus on desired results and start talking about the community's public policy values. When the community has framed its common objectives and values voters will be in a much better position to assess the candidates standing for public office. Having set the tone for the election, citizens will also be in a much stronger position to evaluate the performance of their elected officials after the election.

How do you start a public discussion on local public policy issues? You can start at home with your family, at work during coffee and lunch breaks, with letters to the editor or calls to local radio phone-in shows. Community organizations, service clubs, and sports associations are all appropriate settings for discussions and debates on public policy matters that affect the community. What is important is to have such discussions now, before we elect people to make the decisions we will have to live with and pay for.