

# *Social Justice Network*

Jan./Feb. 2010

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As 2009 drew to a close, I reflected on two events – one very inspiring, the other disturbing. The inspiring one came from a teacher and a class of Grade 6 students; the disturbing one from the Government of Canada.

## **AN INSPIRING STORY**

***“I have written four letters so far,” said student Connor Raikou. “We ask governments and the presidents to help bring peace and help the children.”***

The Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board’s theme for 2009 was **‘Who is my Neighbour?’**. Carla Collier teaches 27 Grade 6 students at Monsignor Clair School in Barrie, Ontario. She wanted her students to connect with their neighbours - not only with the children in their own class, but also with children across the globe deprived of human rights.

She taught them from a book for ages 10-12 called *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis. It is a story of an 11-year old girl growing up in Afghanistan without basic human rights. She courageously dresses as a boy so that she can leave her home to become the ‘breadwinner’ for her family. The students were shocked by the lack of human rights for women and children. Then she taught them other stories such as that of Craig Kielburger and the founding of his movement ‘Free the Children’ from the sweatshops of the world.

The students wanted to do something for these children around the world, so Carla went to the Amnesty International website and found stories of children who are deprived of basic human rights. The students decided that they would write letters of support for some of these children.

They wrote on behalf of displaced children in **Darfur** who had lost parents, homes, food, protection in a war that has been going on for years. They wrote for parents and children in **Chad** who were put out of their homes with nothing provided for them while the government bulldozed their homes. They wrote letters of support for a small community in **Colombia** who refused to take sides in the war. They stood for peace and asked both sides of the conflict to let them live in peace. They wrote to the **Premier of Ontario and their federal MP** asking for equal access to health care for Aboriginal children.

These students, because of a teacher with a global vision, realize, more than the average Canadian adult, that the children of the world deprived of human rights are truly their neighbours. I was profoundly moved by this story of Grade 6 students who reached across continents to embrace their neighbours. When the project was completed, the students wanted to do more projects to support human rights for children of the world.

What an example to those Canadians who protect themselves in the cocoon of indifference. What a lesson for all who think they cannot make a difference in the lives of their global neighbours. I salute these Grade 6 students and their teacher!

## A DISTURBING STORY

***If you fall outside of the government's particular dictum of political correctness, you're toast** (John McKay, Liberal MP).*

The ending of 2009 and the beginning of 2010 was not a time to be proud to be a Canadian from the standpoint of the decisions made by our government. Two of these should upset every Canadian who believes in human rights for all, in a more just and sustainable world, and in a democracy worthy of the name.

Canada is shamed internationally by a government that seems to have little interest in ecological justice and the international advancement of human rights. Both before and after Copenhagen, the world became more and more aware that Canada is a threat to progress on environmental issues. The children of today will rise up and condemn governments and their people for trading their future in the name of the economy. Canada is rated 58 out of 59 countries in its failure to address climate change in a meaningful way.

Then, to add insult to injury, CIDA, a federal government agency, announced that after 35 years they were cutting their funding to KAIROS: the Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives. KAIROS' 2009-2013 proposal had been vetted and approved by CIDA staff; then, from the top, without any credible explanation, the axe came down.

KAIROS is a nationally and internationally respected organization made up of 11 Christian churches and faith-based organizations including United, Anglican, Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian and Mennonite. It works in a wide range of social issues, including human rights in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Middle East. They support partners in countries with the worst human rights violations

including Sudan, the Philippines, Colombia, Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Hundreds of thousands of people benefit from and depend on KAIROS for support.

And while those hundreds of thousands of the world's most vulnerable people will suffer from the cuts to KAIROS, Stephen Harper's government continues to retaliate against anyone whom it perceives as a public voice criticizing his government's policies, whether it be Tar Sands development, the alleged abuse of Afghan prisoners, the government's irresponsible environmental record, or its position on Israel.

In December 2009, speaking in Jerusalem, Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, charged KAIROS with anti-Semitism, claiming it took a leadership role in the boycott of Israeli goods. **Both accusations are blatantly false.**

In a 2008 position paper, KAIROS affirmed the Israeli people's right for a secure and safe state, "recognizing the long, terrible and continuing history of anti-Semitism, and the vital role of Israel to the Jewish people." It clearly stated: "KAIROS does not support any general boycott of Israeli products" and "any use of sanctions against Israel".

The 'Independent Jewish Voices' condemned Immigration Minister Kenney's politicized move to defund a social justice church group: **"This is the new McCarthyism. If you don't tow the government line, you get your funding cut"**.

People working for human rights are the

true victims of the funding cut to KAIROS. The decision, for example, cuts funding for a new legal clinic in the Congo to help women who have been raped in the brutal conflict there; and the 5,000 members of the Women's Popular Organization in Colombia will lose their funding for life-saving protection against rampant human rights abuses

in their country.

And as I think of the Grade 6 students striving to help the global child-victims of human rights abuses, and our government who withdraws funding to do the same, I believe every Canadian should be shamed and strive to get the funding back for KAIROS.

***“The world needs more of KAIROS Canada ... it would be an unparalleled setback for the poor, vulnerable, and disenfranchised if the voice and work of KAIROS in the Global South is muted,” declared Archbishop Desmond Tutu, responding to the news of the CIDA cuts.***

## FACTS

“If the government of Canada has decided that all criticism of Israel is inherently anti-Semitic, and has decided to defund any organization mounting such criticism, *Canadians* are owed an explanation and a full accounting for that policy. Jerusalem is not an acceptable venue for such an explanation and full accounting is to be delivered first. It is not Israel's money, and it's not Minister Kenney's – it is ours. He should explain himself on Canadian soil” (Chris Selley, *National Post*, December 21/09).

In November of 2009, the Conservatives circulated flyers in ridings with lots of Jewish voters implying that the Liberals are anti-Semites who back Hamas and Hezbollah. That led Liberal MP Irwin Cotler, a Jew, to accuse them of “**false, misleading, prejudicial and pernicious slander**” (*Toronto Star*, Dec. 20/09). Leading members of the Jewish community ... sent a letter to Prime Minister Harper asking him to withdraw a taxpayer-funded Conservative flyer. “**We find it highly disturbing that any party or parliamentarian would attempt to use Israel as a wedge to divide the Jewish community and, indeed, for partisan gain,**” the letter says.

“The policies of KAIROS have all been approved by a collective board of KAIROS so in a sense what Mr. Kenney is doing is accusing Canadian churches of being anti-Semitic and I think that is very unfortunate” (Bruce Gregerson, United Church spokesperson). “**It is a horrible charge to make, and to do it with so little thought cheapens the reality of anti-Semitism in the world and diminishes the very careful attention it deserves**” (*Globe & Mail*, Nov. 24/09).

When anyone disagrees publicly with Stephen Harper's policies, he/she pays a price. Haroon Siddiqui points out in a column in the *Toronto Star* on Dec. 20/09: **Peter Tinsley**, chair of the military police commission who initiated the Afghan abuse probe was refused a second term; **Linda Keen**, nuclear watchdog who insisted on safety at Chalk River – fired; **Marc Mayrand**, chief electoral officer who probed Conservative Party election spending, publicly attacked; **Louise Arbour**, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who dared to criticize both the US and Israel - refused support for a second term and publicly rebuked in parliament by the Conservative Government; **Richard Colvin**, victim of Conservative at-

tacks and mudslinging for daring to raise the issue of the torture of prisoners in Afghanistan.

“When you add up all that this government has done, it’s truly scary,” says Gar Pardy, former head of the foreign ministry’s consular services. He is the one who organized the petition that defended Richard Colvin from Conservative mudslinging and which was signed by **133 retired ambassadors**.

Two points must be made: **criticism of Israel does not constitute anti-Semitism**; and **CIDA was developed to fund international aid and not to serve political agendas** (KAIROS media release).

## ACTION

***Remember the Grade 6 students who believed in and wrote letters promoting human rights. Can we do the same?***

Write, e-mail, or phone the **Prime Minister, Minister Bev Oda and your MP** (especially important if he/she is a Conservative).

Express your position on the decision to deny CIDA funding for KAIROS and on the unconvincing reasons offered by Ministers Oda and Kenney for not approving the KAIROS proposal. Why would a group with a 35-year history of working successfully with CIDA suddenly be unaware of CIDA’s program expectations? Why would CIDA staff ask their Minister to sign off on a proposal if it did not satisfy CIDA priorities? Ask that funding for KAIROS be restored promptly.

In addressing the Prime Minister, you might wish to ask the government to

issue a retraction of Minister Jason Kenney’s false accusation that KAIROS has taken “a leadership role in divestment, sanctions and targeted boycotts of Israel.” (Minister Kenney now denies that he said KAIROS is anti-Semitic, but continues to make these claims (*Toronto Star* Dec. 18/09).

**Prime Minister Stephen Harper:** 613-992-4211; e-mail: pm@pm.gc.ca or harper.s@parl.gc.ca

**Minister Bev Oda:** 613-992-2792 or 819-953-6238; e-mail: oda.b@parl.gc.ca

**Local MP:** see the government web site: parl.gc.ca

Address for all three: **House of Commons, Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6** (no postage).

Additional information is available on the KAIROS web site at **www.kairoscanada.org**.

***The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason to hope.***

– Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Inspire us, O God, to take a stand in the quest for a more just world. Give us the courage to support all those who strive for human rights for all members of your global family, and with all those who, in the face of great opposition, bravely continue to build your Kingdom of justice and peace on earth. Amen.

**THANK YOU** to all those who sent donations at Christmas and in the past year. With the rise in postage, it will certainly help.

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