

# CURRENTS

READINGS IN RACE RELATIONS

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## RACIAL JUSTICE : ARE WE MAKING PROGRESS ?

# 20

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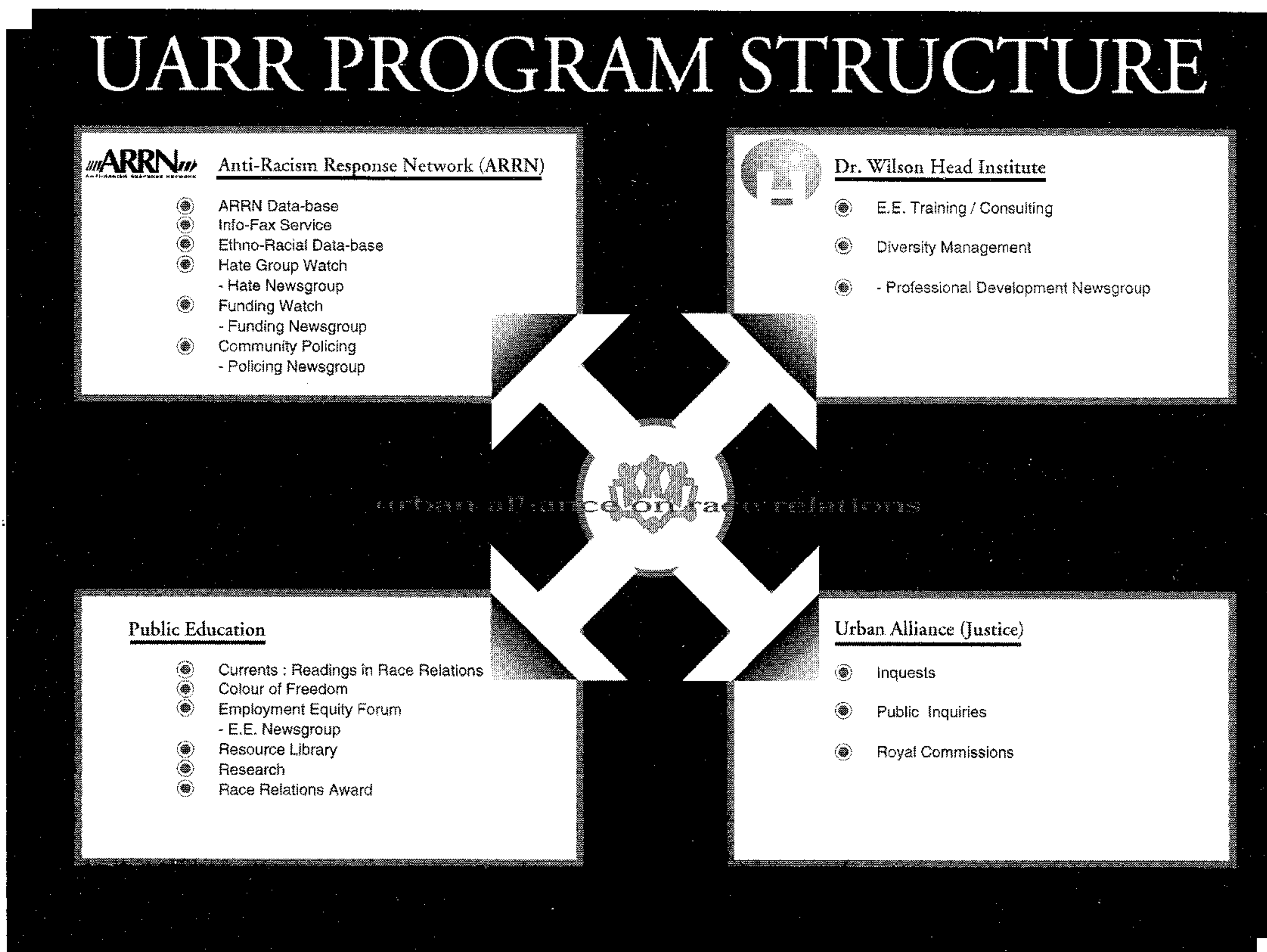
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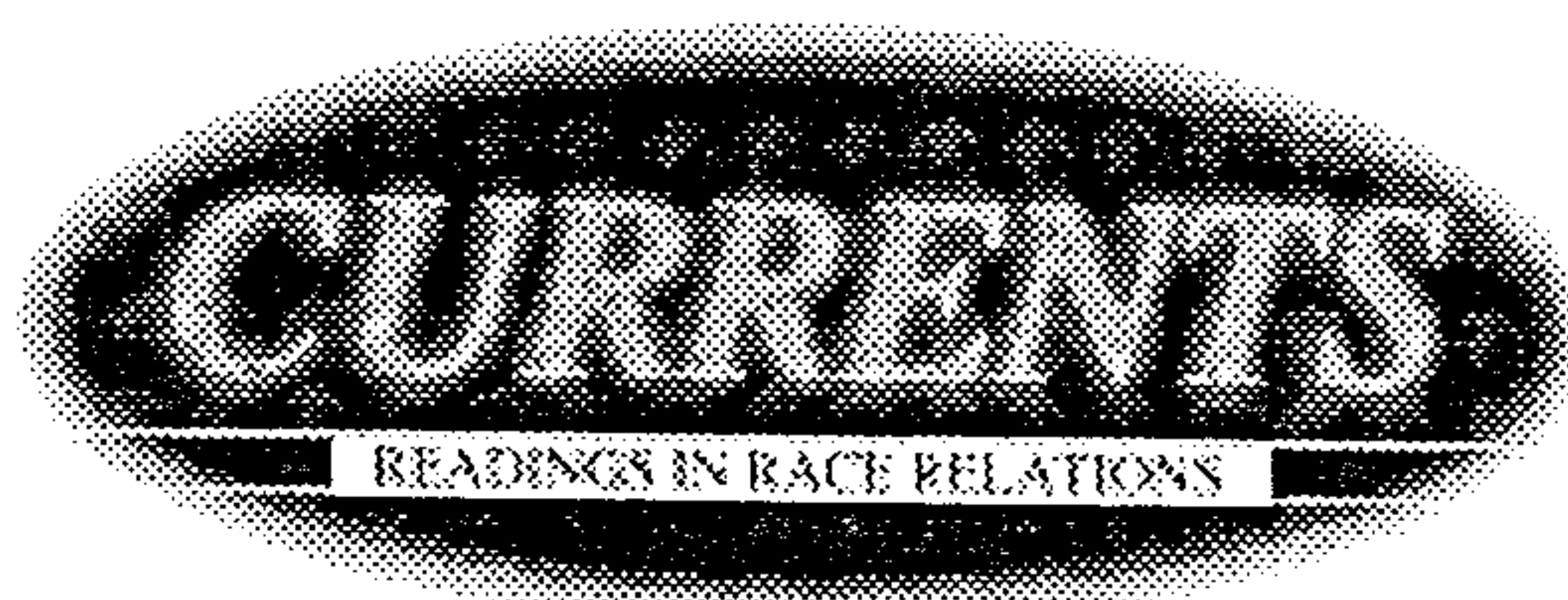
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The Urban Alliance on Race Relations is a non-profit organization consisting of staff and volunteers from all sectors of our multicultural and mutiracial society. UARR's primary goal is to promote a stable and healthy multiracial environment in the community. Volunteers are an integral part of the Alliance and are critical in promoting access and equity in our community.

The four programs of the organization are :





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## **RACIAL JUSTICE: ARE WE MAKING PROGRESS?**

Community and institutional efforts in pursuit of racial justice are perhaps at a crossroads. In defending the status quo and its entrenched racial inequalities, there is a growing climate of opinion which is hostile to anti-racism initiatives and policies. Anti-racism is being inextricably linked to the ideological baggage of the far-left. Efforts to achieve racial equality are increasingly being dismissed as the totalitarian demands of the "politically correct" and therefore foreign to the mainstream of Canadian political thought. Within the free enterprise culture of self reliance and economic betterment through thrift, hard work and individual discipline, anti-racism initiatives are being rejected as a patronizing and unacceptable form of special pleading.

In this prevailing climate of public opinion, of financial constraint and diminishing resources, it is perhaps an appropriate time to recognize the 20th Anniversary of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations. It is also an appropriate opportunity to not only reflect on the accomplishments over the last twenty years, but more importantly to reassess and reevaluate the objectives and effectiveness of community advocacy activities in pursuit of racial equality. If the new social, economic and political realities threaten to reinforce rather than dismantle racial disadvantage and inequity, the analysis of voluntary community efforts to combat racism is an urgent task.

The fundamental rights and freedoms that Canada subscribes to as a liberal democracy include the commitment to full and equal participation of all citizens in the cultural, social, economic and political life of the country. The idea that the circle of Canadian life should embrace all Canadians equally includes the principles of equality of access, equality of opportunity, and the equality of all cultures. Over the last twenty years, these principles have been encoded in various policies at the federal and provincial and municipal levels of government. At the same time, societal abhorrence of racial discrimination is reflected in various legislative forms including human rights acts, labor codes, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The success of the work of the Urban Alliance, and many other community organizations like it, over the last twenty years can be measured perhaps by the enactment of these various pieces of equity legislation and the institutionalization and integration of the notions of racial justice into everyday Canadian life. We now appear to have moved into a new era where these accomplishments are being dismissed, dismantled or diluted. Are the efforts and struggles of the last twenty years being dissipated as we watch in stunned disbelief the retreat by our governments from the commitment to racial justice and the basic tenets of our democratic system?

In reviewing the work of the last twenty years, this issue of Currents demonstrates that immediate, consistent and well developed community mobilization and action has been essential in influencing the course of political, institutional, and social change. In looking to the future and in identifying the need for new alliances, different styles and language, and in recommending next steps, techniques and strategic priorities - the contributors to this issue of Currents clearly recognize and reinforce the necessity that further progress towards racial equality will only be achieved by sustained and direct community involvement and action.

Tim Rees

## WE HAVE DONE WELL AND CAN DO BETTER

GUNTHER PLAUT

Has the social health of our community improved during the last 20 years? To paraphrase John Donne, no communal group is an end in itself, we are all involved in its welfare, for its welfare is ours. There are still many tears in our social fabric and they need mending. There still is racial discrimination.

Let me first pay tribute to the Human Rights Code and what it has done for us. Its very existence has made an enormous difference, for it has set-up a standard through which the voice of the legislator says to all of our citizens: discrimination is wrong in any and every form. To be sure, we cannot legislate the heart, but we can legislate behaviour. Discrimination is injurious to our total polity and there are penalties for practicing it. Laws for driving an automobile prohibit speeding in various forms, and while they do not eliminate speeding they do set a standard and make for reasonably good and safe traffic. Human rights laws are essentially no different, they help us to create a climate of social living which is good for all of us.

I repeat, this does not mean that discrimination against people of colour has disappeared, it has not. But the standard is there and the more we apply it, the more we proclaim it, the more does the public become aware of its necessity. The polarization which we observe south of the border has not happened here. Even the controversy surrounding "Showboat" did not seriously disturb the social equilibrium, though regrettably it tore the fabric of Black-Jewish cooperation. In the end the introduction of anti-Semitism hurt the Black community rather than the Jews. Whether or not the controversy helped to raise the sensitivities of the public is a matter for discussion. When all is said and done, however, it remained a matter of argument, and argument without violence is ultimately a measure of mutual security.

Where do we go from here? I will try and briefly enumerate our challenges.

### **Vigilance:**

It is clear that vigilance remains the price of our liberty and social peace. We have elements in our society both right and left who propose radical measures to either return to the perceived good old days or to break through to the messianic era. The radicals both right and left need to be watched and I pray we will be successful in doing so.

### **Immigration:**

The voices which now are raised against further immigration are not only raucous but also wrong. Immigration is the life-blood of Canada. Our wealth is not in minerals or other material resources, it is people. We live in a climate of economic insecurity and we have a tendency to blame it on a variety of factors. Much of the anti-immigration sentiment arises from unworthy motivations of racial prejudice—but it would be a mistake to tarnish every opponent of present immigration quotas with the brush of prejudice. When questions of policy are emotionally controversial we have a tendency to identify our own opinion with what is right and everyone else's to be both wrong and morally defective. This is understandable, but it falls short of exercising our public franchise intelligently, fusing our freedom of expression in a way that profits the total community and not only our own point of view and our particular agenda.

### **Racism is Incorrect:**

I am leery when I hear of opinions that are called "correct" (which has been highlighted by the controversy over The Bell Curve). But on the other hand there are opinions and policies that will always be correct in the best sense of the word. Racism is incorrect, and always must

be, always will be — and I take this word in its largest sense to include a variety of backgrounds, religions, and lifestyles which make our community such an interesting place to live.

**Multiculturalism:**

We must put the issue of multiculturalism squarely on our agenda. Multiculturalism is under severe attack as a kind of a fancy luxury which Canadians cannot afford. To this end its foes are citing cultural giveaways and the support of ethnic dance and food festivals at a time when serious problems assail our common polity. But these attacks hide the issue of racism that underlies them.

Multiculturalism does not, as its enemies proclaim, mean an attack on Canada's national character. It does not mean

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*“Racism is incorrect, and always must be, always will be”*

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that Canadian history no longer warrants our attention. Quite on the contrary, multiculturalism as I understand it represents the ultimate distinction which Canada has already achieved and must preserve at all costs. It proclaims a novel truth: That people can live together while cherishing their own traditions. While they acknowledge without fear the fact that Canada is composed of many strands of backgrounds, that very fact shapes the reality we call Canada at its best: A land in which people live at peace and see in this nation a model for all nations to follow. In the Hebrew Bible, Joseph was distinguished by a coat of many colours — and so is Canada today. The very patience which Canadians have shown with the sovereignty movement in Quebec proves that we acknowledge differences as legitimate. It is because of this that I hope that Quebecers too will recognize the special character of this nation, and will decide that precisely because they are different they have a valued place in our midst.

I hear many complaints, and to some degree justifiably so, that the level of national consciousness is very low in this country. That is a pity, but on the other hand we are protected from a chauvinism, which characterizes so many other nations.

Still we must recognize that everywhere we find an emphasis on racial and ethnic “independence”. It is rarely a drive for political separation of the Quebec type; rather, it stresses identity and selfness over integration into society as a whole. This creates a difficult balance for those who belong to the group, because they want to be loyal to their own which often they interpret as disinterest and non-participation in the larger community. In some ways this is the flip side of race discrimination. It diminishes the community in interest of identity. Here is a fertile field for further study.

**Anti-Semitism:**

I feel constrained to call attention to a phenomenon that some 50 years ago we hoped we would never find again. I refer to the new lies of anti-Semitism and it comes in many instances from unexpected quarters. This is not the place to examine its origins, but to leave it unmentioned is no longer possible. It appears that scapegoating remains part of our cultural and political agenda.

**Information Highway:**

A new avenue of achieving visibility beckons. I refer to the Internet where many groups have whole pages which reach millions of viewers. Amongst the creators of such programs are groups which spout the worst outcroppings of race and religious hatred. They need a voice of repudiation and reason — not in order to convince their creators but to give the surfers on the Internet an opportunity to hear another point of view. This is a new field, totally unregulated, and here lies not only a challenge for us but a great opportunity.

It is my hope that the next 20 years will see the Urban Alliance striving to fulfill the two major elements of its very name: may it be urban, that is, keep in mind the needs for living in the city, the complexity of the tasks and the dangers that always lurk. And let it be an alliance of various forces and opinions, all of them joining in their vision of a Toronto in which the many different people can live together harmoniously and peacefully.

I am therefore hopeful that we are on the right track and that the progress that we have made in the last 20

years has every prospect of being enlarged rather than diminished. To me as a person with a religious background, such an alliance must rest on the recognition that we are all children of God. None is diminished because of race, nationality, background or whatever else may set him or her aside. While we have not done badly in the past much remains to be done.

*Gunther Plaut is Rabbi Emeritus at Holy Blossom Temple and a founding member of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations. This article is drawn from an address given to the 20th Anniversary Dinner of the Urban Alliance.*

## TO THOSE WHO LANGUISH IN THE CORNERS OF SOCIETY

ROSEMARY BROWN

The phenomenon of racism is not, and never has been, confined to the boundaries of neighbourhoods, countries or continents. It is not bound by class ideologies or doctrines. It would be a major revelation if one could find any society today that is completely free of some form of its manifestation. As author and humanist, Maya Angelou, observed:

The plague of racism is insidious, entering into our minds as smoothly and quietly and invisibly as floating airborne microbes enter into our bodies to find lifelong purchase from our bloodstream's.

We need only turn to the news media to see how racial prejudice manifests itself into violence that tears people and nations apart. Even greater than economic suffering, racism, imposes a steep price in terms of broken bodies, mind and spirits.

The world is a much smaller place than it was twenty years ago. Today we see ourselves as global citizens, and with this perspective recognize that we are not insulated from the destruction that racism fuels. The most insidious aspect of racism is that it destroys the inner self. It smothers hope. It weakens and destroys one's sense of belonging, identity and dignity.

Eradicating such prejudice here at home, and seeking to abolish it from the international community must be humanity's goal. The pursuit of human rights is one way in which we, as individuals and communities, are attempting to do just that.

Human rights principles, related laws and institutions in Canada grew out of a direct response to prejudice and

discrimination against racial minority people. It is not necessary to journey very far back in time to see how painful that growth has been, and continues to be. Up until the 1940's there was no redress for persons who were subjected to racial discrimination. In the view of Canadian courts, racist practices were neither immoral nor illegal. It took the atrocities of World War II to shake our collective sensibility, and move legislators and the courts to create protections for human rights.

In 1944, four years before the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed, Ontario pioneered Canada's first Racial Discrimination Act. This Act prohibited the publication, display or broadcast of materials indicating an intent to discriminate on the basis of race or creed. Equally significant, legislators affirmed that discrimination was against public policy.

The Racial Discrimination Act was followed shortly after by the Fair Accommodation Practices Act. These two pieces of legislation, however, did not put a halt to the rise in acts of racial discrimination, particularly against

Jews and Blacks. Consequently demands for more effective measures to provide for broad protection of human rights were made. Over the next decade, the efforts of human rights advocates found support through a profound shift in attitude against racial discrimination in Ontario. Determined voices calling for racial tolerance echoed from all sectors of the community. This community-based initiative advocated for comprehensive human rights coverage. In 1962, as a direct result of such persistent demands, the Ontario Human Rights Commission was established, and legislation that consolidated various anti-discrimination provisions into one comprehensive Code was introduced.

The establishment of the Commission culminated many years of hard work on the part of thoughtful and courageous people who believed that one should, as Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. stated, "be judged by the content of one's character rather than by the colour of one's skin." The Ontario Human Rights Code itself was based on the principles enunciated in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Over the following decade these principles, and the Commission, were put through severe tests.

During the mid-1970's, there was a resurgence of the overt acts of discrimination and racism that had been manifest in Ontario during the 1950's and 1960's. These manifestations of prejudice were not only directed at new immigrants arriving from non-European countries, but also at racial and ethnic minorities whose ancestry was deeply rooted in Canada's history.

The Commission found itself facing the challenges presented by the dramatic increase in racist activity. The rapidly changing social climate required that new avenues for advancing social equity and racial harmony had to be pursued. In 1976, the Commission became a public body with independent commissioners appointed from outside the Civil Service. Over the next three years the Race Relations Division, forerunner of the Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat, was created within the Commission to deal exclusively with rising community tensions. These steps set into motion a mechanism for ensuring that public education became a key component of the Commission's work.

In the years that followed, both the Code and the infrastructure of the Commission were expanded. The prohibited grounds of discrimination were broadened, and provisions were set in place for the Commission to conduct investigations into systemic discrimination.

The Commission also moved to develop a strong public education role, and to focus on policy development and research.

### The Present Climate

While positive gains in advancing human rights principles have been made over the past two decades, the present social climate presents cause for concern about the advancement of human rights and the promotion of social equity.

Today, there are strident attacks against immigration and refugee policies in the media, and we have become, as Professor Irving Abella notes, a "nation of immigrants who hate immigration, especially immigration from non-European nations."<sup>1</sup> Although there is an abundance of evidence to counter the many myths that tend to disparage racial minority immigrants, one has to ask how is it that these assumptions are sustained; and why do the myths persist, despite the fact that statistics defy the charges that "immigrants" are stealing jobs from "Canadians" or burdening our welfare system.

Where crime is at issue, entire groups are being judged by an offense committed by an individual, and an entire community of people can be held liable and under suspicion for criminal acts of individuals. The actions of a few individuals are often used to reinforce and exploit the negative stereotypes used to justify and sustain prejudices and discriminatory practices against the communities of which they are members. Today too there are open attacks on positive measures designed to overcome generations of discrimination and disadvantage.

Despite the evidence that most people would agree that racism is ugly and repugnant, it has somehow become acceptable to attack measures protecting and promoting social equity. The province's Equity Employment Act implemented last September, was greeted harshly by its opponents as "an odious twisting" of the basic societal



values of fairness, merit and equality. This view is bolstered by the naive assumption that the invisible hand of the marketplace deals fairly with racial minorities, notwithstanding the fact that time and again merit, talent and natural intelligence are awarded little value with regard to women, Native Canadians and racial minority persons.

We know that employment equity and pay equity are part of society's attempt to get at the root cause of inequality in the workplace. However, as employment equity and pay equity open the way to those persons and groups that have, for generations, been shut out from the opportunities to contribute equally to the economic well-being of their community, these measures are being attacked with accusations of "reverse discrimination."

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*a "nation of immigrants who hate immigration, especially immigration from non-European Nations"*

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Hard facts bear out the need for positive measures, yet the voices of opposition against such measures continue to gain volume. Equity-seeking persons and groups who know that those who are generating a backlash, based on lies and distortions, do so to undermine and reverse the hard-earned gains that racial minorities and society as a whole, have made over the years.

There is need to counter the messages of hate and intolerance that are finding their way to our youth, as proponents of racial intolerance and social inequity infiltrate our schools, colleges and universities to seduce students with falsities and distortions. In recognizing the importance of teaching away prejudices, Maya Angelou speaks out on racism:

"It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength. We all know that diversity makes for richer tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter their colour."

The subtlety and pervasiveness of many forms of racism are only now being understood by a mainstream society accustomed to thinking of discrimination and prejudice in terms of direct and overt acts. Over the years the perpetrators of discrimination have fine-tuned their practices and rhetoric to mask their efforts to keep the doors of opportunity firmly closed to persons of racial and ethnic minority groups.

Thirty-three years after it was established, the Commission finds itself still seeking new ways of addressing discrimination and inequality based on race and other grounds. Even as the Commission proceeds case by case, implementing public interest remedies to eliminate broader systemic barriers, there remains the need for comprehensive action throughout society.

The present-day challenges facing human rights advocates are in many ways even more formidable than the obstacles of twenty years ago. If equality and broad social justice are to be achieved, it is imperative for us to strengthen our resolve, renew our commitment, and determine what new strategies are to be explored.

Achieving social equity should be a promise made to each and every member of our society. This promise is that the primacy of human dignity will be upheld, and that the contribution of each individual to the common wealth of our community is welcome and meaningful. We should elect to impose upon ourselves a positive duty to stand in practical solidarity with the many who, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "languish in the corners of our society."

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, an organization created by some of our nation's greatest believers in human rights, and whose commitment and contributions to the advancement of human rights and social justice remains undiminished. Community organizations such as the Urban Alliance keep us mindful of the unmistakable call for greater accountability, and of the nation's debt owed to justice.

*Rosemary Brown is Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission*

<sup>1</sup> Niagara Falls Review, March 9, 1995. Mark Sheffington.

## RACE RELATIONS IN CANADA : A TROUBLED PAST AND STRAINED FUTURE

ANTONIA A. SHELTON

"In an age when loneliness, malaise and an overwhelming bigness assail us, our ethnic communities are sometimes no more than bits of driftwood to which a few people cling in the midst of a typhoon. What we need are lifeboats. What we need is Noah's ark."<sup>1</sup>

Joy Kogawa

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The justification for the historical treatment of Aboriginal people by the Canadian government, and the development of Canada's national immigration policy was not and is not based solely on economic grounds. The justification, by which some Canadians exploit other Canadians is based upon an ideology of white superiority. This is critical to understanding the facts that shape the past and present condition of race relations in Canada.

Dark skinned people, whether they be Aboriginal or recent immigrants, are faced by white individuals who have been socialized from the cradle that it is their laws, science, religion, and psychosexual mores that are superior. French explorer Jacques Cartier, when encountering "Canadian" Aboriginal people for the first time, commented:

"These people may well be called savage; for they are the sorriest folk there can be in this world...They go quite naked except for a small skin with which they cover their privy parts and for a few old furs which they throw over their shoulders...They have their heads shaved all around in circles, except for a tuft on the top of the head, which they leave long like a horse's tail. This they do up upon their heads and tie in a knot with leather thongs".<sup>2</sup>

Immigration policy has sought to maintain a "bleached" Canada. Immigration from Britain and other Western European countries was encouraged, but not from non-white countries. The horrors of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, suspension of immigration by Blacks in 1911 and the refusal to take Jew-

ish refugees escaping the Holocaust, are examples of the seriousness of those policy makers who intended to keep Canada predominantly a White country.<sup>3</sup>

### Short Lived Reform

With Canada's increasing prominence on the international stage in the 1960's and 70's and its increasing need for skilled labour, immigration policies were forced to adjust. The 1978 Immigration Act marked the end of state sanctioned racial discrimination.

Unable to reach a modus vivendi with Francophone Quebec, or Aboriginal people, and recognizing the increasing prominence of Canada's new "visible minority" population, government policies in the 1970s and 80s witnessed the enactment of legislation, such as Human Rights Codes, a Special Parliamentary Committee on the Participation of Visible Minorities in Canadian Society, the Official Languages Act, Federal Employment Equity Act, and the Multiculturalism Act. While these reforms were geared towards extending citizenship to marginalized communities, insofar as giving them a greater stake in mainstream society, the definition of citizenship however still remained unchallenged.

Notwithstanding this apparent proliferation of legislation, their impact has been minimal. Systemic, indirect discrimination has remained intact. Language, religion, traditional educational systems, and the workplace have continued to reflect a white male Eurocentric dominated society. Systemic discriminatory practices have continued to make invisible from

the Canadian mainstream the minorities that have always been part of Canada's landscape and are still arriving. If you don't belong to the mainstream because of differences of race, religion, language, etcetra, then full citizenship has continued to remain illusive.

That was the 1970s and 80s, and this is the 90s. The 90s is marked by a failed attempt to remake the identity of Canada through Meech and the Charlottetown Accord. Liberal reform, and statesmanship in the form of constitutional redrafting, has given way to an unprecedented mistrust of politicians and a pervasive cynicism of so-called "interest group demands". The policy platform of the Reform Party perhaps best represents from the Canadian heartland the freeze that has set in over attempts to extend Canadian citizenship to minority communities. The demographic composition of newcomers, mainly from non-European countries, and the volume and sophistication of their demands to be included in the mainstream of Canadian citizenship, has brought a very real backlash in the 90s. Tolerance is giving way to intolerance.

#### The Changing Demographics

A report released in May 1992, by the Advisory Council on Advertising states that, "Canada's racial minority population will hit 5.7 million by the year 2001 or 17.7% of the total estimated population of 32 million. Ontario will be the host province for more than half of Canada's racial minorities". By 1996, the figures will be 1.47 million or 35.1% in Metropolitan Toronto. Furthermore, between 1981 and 1986, 43% of all immigrants entering Canada were born in Asian countries while 29% were from European countries. Asia is presently the largest single source of Canadian immigrants.<sup>4</sup> The fear and anxiety surrounding the explosion of non-white immigrants to areas such as Metropolitan Toronto is very real. "The economic aspect of recent immigration patterns is that the racial minority population by the year 2001 will control at least a 5th of Canada's gross domestic product which will amount to \$300 billion."<sup>5</sup>

#### Unity or Separation?

In November, 1993, a Decima report entitled, *Canadians' Attitudes Toward Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada*, found that a majority of Canadians (54% of

those surveyed) believe immigration policy allows too many people of different races and cultures into Canada.<sup>6</sup>

Behind the call for a strong Canadian identity is the question of who will define this identity and more importantly who will it most benefit. The Decima report has this to say: "...Canadians report a preference for a 'homogenization' of society through adoption by immigrants of Canada's values and way of life. While it would be an overstatement to suggest that there is little tolerance for 'difference' in Canadian society, there is a preference for conformity in the way of life. The lack of conformity—that is the 'multicultural' rather than 'melting pot' approach to immigration and ethnic settlement—is a source of some frustration for Canadians. This frustration asserts itself and becomes more pronounced or more intense when the population believes that perceived 'special interests' are making demands of society. The data suggest that Canadians generally are increasingly intolerant of "interest group" demands. There is a relatively strong view that particular ethnic, racial or religious minorities must make efforts to adapt to Canada rather than insisting upon a maintenance of difference."<sup>7</sup>

The difficulty for racial minorities is understanding what is being asked of them by the rest of Canada. Minorities in Canada are now seeking to implement principles of equality and challenge discriminatory practices. Turbans in the RCMP, turbans in Legion halls, employment equity, and Black focused schools are recent examples of widely publicized issues that have tested the boundaries of Canadian identity. Are minorities now being asked not to pressure for sickle cell to be recognized in the hospitals because it is a Black blood disorder? Should Sikhs denounce their religious head wear not because of health and safety issues but because it challenges the superiority of Judeo Christian beliefs? What is considered a reasonable trade-off to move towards national unity? It isn't that minorities don't want a unified and strong Canada but it appears that the rhetoric of inclusion is becoming the code word for homogenization.

Extreme ideologues on the right and left in Canada would like to see a separation of the races and cultures. Dictated by geographic, economic, social and political imperatives, power would shift from large centralized units to self-centred communities of interest.