



This “thought sheet” is produced as a service of the L’Arche Canada Foundation to the Canadian public. We offer it as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today. Our goal in this publication is to strengthen the experience of human solidarity in Canada by making available some of this combined wisdom and reflection.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

# A Human Future

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## Pursuing Common Values and Transparency in Health Care: A Call to Recover our Moral Imagination

*from an interview with Nuala P. Kenny, SC, MD, FRCP(C)*



“Unless we can reclaim our commitment to one another, we’re not a society.”

*This issue presents portions of a challenging analysis by respected Canadian health care advocate Dr. Nuala Kenny, Head of the Department of Bio-ethics at Dalhousie University. In her direct, no-nonsense style Dr. Kenny names festering issues and calls Canadians to become involved in the health care system. She urges us to move beyond the private and particular values of our family or group to discover the common values we share as Canadians, whatever our income bracket, education, social standing or ethnic or religious connections, and to insist that policy and practical decisions reflect these values. Ursula Franklin and Bob Rae offer comments related to Dr. Kenny’s thoughts. We believe that giving time to critical reflection on our society and to involvement in public issues is one measure of our integrity as citizens. Beth Porter, Editor.*

THE LURE OF THE TECHNICAL FIX is very strong in our society. As Chief of Pediatrics at our wonderful Children’s Hospital in Halifax I became concerned that the annual telethon showed only the spectacular cures: children flown in by helicopter and running out the door after six weeks in ICU, teens who heroically overcame cancer. I urged that we show children who have illnesses and then live with disability, and families who receive life-long medical support. I met with resistance. But the hospital is not a mythic world of magical fixes, nor is it meant to be.

During the last century Canadians moved from communal and societal understandings of the human condi-

## Bob Rae



SANDRA RUSSELL

*Canadians want European-style services and American-style taxes.*

*Health care has become a metaphor for Canada itself.... In the public mind, the way we care for the ill is representative of the principles of Canadian social democracy.... [But] the public is telling us that if they do not get what they want from the public sector, they will demand it from the private sector. [And] the cost of the collapse of the system will be borne by those least able to afford it.... If Canadians cannot recognize that 'Taxes are the price we pay for civilization,' as Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, [they will be] increasingly less prepared to pay what is required to sustain the public commonwealth.*

From: "Health Policy in the Consumer Era," in *Do We Care? Renewing Canada's Commitment to Health*, ed. Margaret A. Somerville, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999.

**BOB RAE** | former Premier of the Province of Ontario, respected lawyer, writer and speaker on matters of public concern.

tion and human needs to individualistic understandings. The rights movements are a part of this shift, empowering individual choice. Coupled with this change is the increasing power of science and technology to benefit individuals. This is especially evident in Health. The triumphs of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were in public health. The triumphs of the second half benefit individuals: cardiopulmonary resuscitation, transplantation, dialysis. However, our focus on the individual and our expectations for speedy technical fixes has been accompanied by a loss of the traditional spiritual underpinnings, and by the emergence of the market in every aspect of human life. (Not surprisingly, the Social Services, which try to respond to needs where there isn't a medical solution, are notoriously underfunded, for there are no big profits in this area.) James Edwards, who wrote the book *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism*, talks about us as being rootless and valueless. Edwards suggests the metaphor for modern society is the shopping mall with, right next to each other, a health food store, high fashion, a doctor giving laser eye surgery, a sexy lingerie shop.

Our society's emphasis on the market and on quick technical solutions and its loss of the spiritual have weakened our capacity for in-depth reflection. In our daily lives most of us have abundant superficial stimulation for our imagination but little stimulation for our moral imagination and little encouragement to examine issues that are at the heart of our lives, issues that are ultimately spiritual: What, for instance, is quality of life? (Is it only or even always a healthy body?) We need a more holistic, values-based approach to what are in fact moral questions for communities. All health care encounters are encounters of moral meaning. Illness, potential disability, dying—these experiences raise fundamental questions. There is an urgent call today for us to stir up our critical faculties as citizens, and to become more involved, if we want a compassionate Canadian society.

The challenge is for us to come together and make choices

## Ursula Franklin



*For the work ahead, whether it is concentrated on the environment or education, on health care or the extent to which the public sphere remains an essential part of Canadian life, the central need is for good government.... We must be clear that many of the political issues in which we as citizens may have to intervene have a common root – which is, in short, the denial of any standpoint other than profit. Along with clarity comes solidarity – the recognition that this is not our private problem and if it is to be solved, that we cannot accept a private solution. Justice is indivisible.*

(from “Our Legitimate Expectations for Good Government,” in *Canadian Perspectives*, Winter, 2001, a publication of the Council of Canadians.)

**URSULA FRANKLIN** | *renowned Canadian scientist and social justice advocate, recipient of the Council of Canadians’ Distinguished Canadian Award for 2000.*

that are based on our solidarity as a society. Good, long-term public policy requires clear common values above and beyond partisanship and political ideologies. As we support one another to bring back moral, personal, relationship and community questions into the area of decision-making, we will recognize that our emphasis on individual rights and our desire to be respectful of the pluralism of modern society can draw us away from identifying what we do hold in common. We will need to honestly confront our conflicts, grapple with the fact that everyone will not be able to have it all, and clarify together what are our fundamental Canadian values. Then, we need to ensure that decisions consistently reflect these values. We cannot hope for perfect decisions but we can hope for good decisions arrived at with transparency and respect.

To bring systemic transformation, mutual support will be crucial as we seek to probe the real values behind decisions both at the macro level and, wherever we are involved, at the micro level. The tendency today is to be dismissive of people who raise challenging questions, and to bully them out of seeking proper answers. We must insist on looking at the deeper implications of resource allocation, and especially in this highly charged area insist on values-based decisions. For instance, over the past fifteen years recommendations made about Health Care have raised the same few basic issues. We should ask ourselves whose interests are served when changes we



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know are needed are not made, and available resources are directed to other purposes.

The state of our society should be of great concern to us. Economists used to say that when the economy of a nation rose, everyone including the poor benefited. This is no longer the case. For example, a U.N. study reports that in Canada, in 1973, the families in the highest ten percent income bracket had 21 times the spending capacity of those in the lowest ten percent. By 1996, that gap had leaped from 21 to 314 percent!

We can be distracted by debating the niceties of individual rights and values. But, we need to be able to identify the real impact of decisions that benefit only a privileged few – because, unless we can reclaim our commitment to each other, we're not a society!

\*From the conference, "A Human Future: On Building a Compassionate Society," December 5, 2001, Richmond Hill, Ontario.

*The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 121 communities of L'Arche on five continents, 26 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.*



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## FOR REFLECTION

“The examined life makes a virtue of uncertainty ... not a comfortable idea,” writes J. R. Saul. “A citizen-based democracy is built upon participation, which is the very expression of permanent discomfort. The corporatist system is built upon the citizen’s desire for comfort.”\* The future of the Canadian Health Care system depends on citizens living an examined life and individually and collectively engaging a range of issues with their critical intelligence. How, where, and with whom do I reflect critically? How much time do I give to my role as citizen?

Can the Canadian vision of an egalitarian society be so attractive, and Canada be seen as so winsome a place to live and work, that all of us, individuals and corporations, will not blink at a fair increase in our taxes? If I think not, what is my vision for public services in Canada?

\*The Unconscious Civilization, Anansi, 1995.

## FOR YOUR INTEREST

- Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada: [www.healthcarecommission.ca/](http://www.healthcarecommission.ca/) (Go to “Consultations” on this site to fill out Workbooks) Toll free: 1-800-793-6161
- Canadian Cooperatives Association: [www.coopcca.com](http://www.coopcca.com)  
In B.C.: [www.ccabc.bc.ca](http://www.ccabc.bc.ca)
- The Council of Canadians: [www.canadians.org](http://www.canadians.org)
- Nuala P. Kenny: *What Good is Health Care?: Reflections on the Canadian Experience*, Cdn. Healthcare Ass'n Press, August 2002
- Bob Rae: *The Three Questions: Prosperity and the Public Good*, Viking Penguin Books Canada, 1998.

The mission of the L'Arche Canada Foundation is to encourage financial support of L'Arche and to help create a human future for Canadians.