

A Civil Society: A habit of the heart

By David Evans and Satya Das

In ages to come, the dawn of the Common Era's third millennium will be remembered as the watershed moment of transition from Government for the People to genuine Government by the People.

And a Civil Society – a state of mind built on five pillars of respect, literacy, rights, the rule of law and meaningful economic opportunity – will be the essence, the lifeblood that makes this new era truly human.

Already, all around us, we can see progress toward a civilization that no longer accepts that some must lose for others to win in the sense of reaching their full human potential. We have charters of rights and freedoms; we have international criminal courts; we have laws that embody a growing revulsion against discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and economic background.

We see progress toward a world in which both governments and private individuals feel guided and constrained by the mass of ordinary people whose only power is the certain knowledge that they share common values. Today in Alberta we have a public health system our leaders wanted to change but couldn't, we have peace policies where leaders wanted war, we have constitutional "notwithstanding clauses" governments fear to use.

We see progress toward a world in which citizens do not wait for government, but rather take it upon themselves to organize events like Daughter's Day to encourage new ways to ensure an equitable, respectful society – and to send out signals that old dispensations must change.

But in a world still willing to live with the marginalization and death of too many aboriginal women, and that still struggles to accept same-sex relationships – even in a land of diversity and inclusion such as Canada – we are still many, many bricks from the finished human home. What are these five pillars on which it must stand?

Respect:

Citizens for a Civil Society believes that the respect we once demanded for ourselves must now become the Respect we willingly and actively give to all other living human beings. That is to say, we believe that grudging tolerance, while better than intolerance, must mature into instinctive, automatic, colour-blind, gender-blind inclusion. This Respect would have made the Holocaust, the India's communal violence in 1947 and the Rwandan genocide unthinkable, because people would no longer have been capable of so grossly exaggerating difference.

Literacy:

We believe the literacy we once saw as the doorway for our own advancement and intellectual fulfillment, and our own ability to compete for the heights, must become the Literacy that allows everyone to learn and understand and think for themselves. Literacy is the prerequisite for education, and education fuels understanding. Literacy makes possible the communication with which people link up across town and around the world to bypass government and create new consensus.

Law:

We believe the law we once saw dictated by rulers – be they absolute monarchs, republican oligarchs or bullying democratic majorities – must become subsumed in the Rule of Law that stands higher than both the government of the day and the sometimes over-mighty citizens of the private sector. We believe that no government, however wise and effective in reducing evil, can be truly just if its freedom is not limited by a higher law it cannot readily change.

Rights:

We believe the rights that individuals and groups once demanded for themselves in all too many revolutions must become Human Rights that everyone must be accorded. The right to enjoy a clean environment, for example, becomes the equally compelling responsibility to ensure that a clean environment and husbanded resources are preserved for future generations - even if that means less for those of us living today. The concept of Rights is most powerfully enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights – one of the most magnificent examples of this Civil Society already at work in the world.

Opportunity:

We believe that the intellectual, social and economic opportunity we have always demanded for ourselves and our children must become the Opportunity that no one is denied, even if it temporarily means more intense competition for positions from many peoples of the world previously held back.

Some might argue that these ideas are not particularly new. We argue that with the emphasis on universality – the realization that these five keys to civilization cannot endure even for the rich and mighty unless the poorest, weakest child in the smallest, most obscure and autocratic community has them too – our pillars are actually radical and revolutionary.

Some might argue that a like-minded, progressive, favorably disposed government is the key to making these pillars a reality. But we believe that the realization of a Civil Society is a process to which government is incidental.

Government can't change how people feel about girls' education, or about subtle discrimination against gays or immigrants from different cultures. Only people can do that – with a new state of

mind, a new culture of human rights. And only with a Civil Society can that new state of mind gradually mature and expand its grip.

And finally, some might argue that this idea of a Civil Society is the utopian fantasy of dreamers, and that we must be more accepting in practice of the real world as we find it.

But we argue that the progressing world we live in today was created by individual, initially isolated and powerless individuals who wouldn't accept things as they were. South Africa's Mandela and India's Gandhi didn't change the world because they were powerful, they became powerful by first changing the world - by building a Civil Society and changing the culture of the mind.

Albeit likely in a smaller and more modest way, that's what all of us can do.

Citizens for a Civil Society
October 2014