



On The Verge

Government is listening; let's give them an earful

Editorial

BY MIKE LEWIS

This is a good news edition. In this quarter's articles you will find examples of thoughtful experimentation. There are leaders committed to achieving better results and to learning through experience. Achievements occur with reasonable investments of resources and time. The overall impression is one of progress.

Not "progress" in the sense of a single straight line between two points. No, there are lots of bumps evident in the reportage you will read here. Nor is there one point of departure, but many – a great many – and a wide diversity of leadership and partners as well. It points to the breadth of ideas, concepts, and practices that CED encompasses in this country, and to how they are percolating. A palpable sense of movement is emerging.

In the last edition I stressed the importance of precision in our definition of CED. I stand by that. Nevertheless, we must be open to including, and being included within, larger coalitions, alliances and movements that have values and goals similar to our own. And frankly, I don't think there has been a more important time to do this than *right now*. Since 2000, the Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet) has hosted a national discussion about public policies supportive of CED. Finally our collective efforts in that regard appear to be bearing fruit.

The Province of Manitoba has picked up on parts of the CCEDNet agenda, particularly on the call for multi-year investment in organizations that take an integrated, multi-stakeholder approach to revitalizing disadvantaged communities. In Nova Scotia, too, innovations in the

capitalization of community-based enterprise are in line with what we in CCEDNet have been advocating. Recent tax credits and partnerships between the provincial government, credit unions, and the co-operative movement are all very promising.

Even in relation to the federal government there are signs that we are on the verge of a strategic breakthrough.

Last November, at the tenth anniversary celebration of the Caledon Institute for Social Policy, federal Liberal Party leadership candidate Paul Martin announced his three top social policy priorities: the disabled, CED and the social economy, and Aboriginal issues. In the crowd were representatives of the Chantier de l'économie sociale, a network of networks that brings together hundreds of Québec organizations committed to greater social inclusion and economic vitality. Martin's campaign team accepted the Chantier's offer to organize a town hall forum in Montréal.

The forum took place in May. On national television, Nancy Neamtan, Chantier President and a member of CCEDNet's National Policy Council, opened with a strong message on CED and the social economy. After a 20-minute speech Martin took uncensored questions from the audience.

In response to questions from Nancy, Martin committed to a federal role in building community capacity to forge social and economic revitalization. He also committed to the use of tax credits as a way to raise equity for CED initiatives and social enterprises. We were delighted. At a second forum a couple of weeks later, after a question from Dianne Kelderman (another National Policy Council member), Martin vigorously reaffirmed his commitment to these two areas.

A promising beginning? Yes! Sufficient in and of itself? No!

In the coming six months there is much work to do. We must meet with other federal leadership candidates and press other party leaders. We must get our message out to local politicians. Especially in English Canada we must reach out to others to elevate a communities agenda as a durable feature of federal and provincial policy. Co-operatives, credit unions, employment and training support organizations, Community Futures Development Corporations, activists and advocates of corporate social responsibility, labour-sponsored investment funds, women's enterprise, aboriginal development – all have a vital interest in communities that are economic viable, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable. We must intensify our discussions and linkages among them all.

Is Martin reliable? As regional development minister he was a big supporter of CED in the early '90s. RÉSO, one of Canada's most successful community development corporations, was a beneficiary of his tenure. Long-term support for the core funding of RÉSO and other CDCs was forthcoming. Cash was made available to capitalize an investment fund supportive of community enterprises committed to greater inclusion of marginalized residents.

Ten years later, we must do everything we can to seize the moment. Whatever happens in the months ahead on the partisan political landscape, we have to make sure we come out of 2003 much better positioned to advance the social and economic goals we work towards daily.



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