

INITIATING A CITIZEN-
RUN ECONOMY

A Preliminary Evaluation and First Stage
Proposal

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Some campaigns have regular contact with one another while others have little knowledge of each others' existence. Most campaigns' relationships with government officials have been poor; with established major parties disastrous; with organized labour almost non-existent; and with the media, dependant on the sensational news value of their actions. The majority of campaigns would like to win a permanent role for citizen participation in managing the Canadian economy.

Positive Aspects

Their greatest effect have been in helping develop an awareness of our economy and the actual corporate decision making process. In pointing to the dichotomy between the public interest and the existing Canadian economy, they have given added strength to citizen action efforts and to making private and public corporate organizations aware of a growing unrest about their special privileges in Canada.

Campaigns had been able to draw citizens together to look at key power issues instead of local individual crises issues. They have attracted talented individuals, developed experimental citizen action strategies, and been able to carry out their programmes without being greatly divided by internal dissension.

Most campaigns have survived and not stopped discussing and acting on the problems corporate organizations pose to their daily members' lives or future as citizen-consumer and citizen-employee campaigns. Their findings have challenged corporate infor-

mation and their views have shaken the complacency of corporate publicity.

Negative Aspects

Campaigns, however, have achieved few changes in corporate control of our laws and economy. There has been little actual citizen involvement in and control of corporate decision making. Campaigns have only been able at best to delay or modify corporate programs and policies.

In addition, campaigns have not done an adequate job of explaining to the public why corporate organizations hold power and what are the details of their campaign programmes for changing the Canadian economy. While most campaigns recognize that slight modifications to the capitalist economy and to our dependency on the United States will not solve our basic income distribution and decision making problems, campaigns have been too vague in launching major attacks on economic development programmes that benefit only a few agencies and individuals.

Campaigns have also not paid enough attention to developing greater public support and independent financial bases. While campaigns' more aggressive tactics and belief in changing the citizen into a fighting professional citizen have attracted experienced community activists, they have not actively sought alliances with workers participation and sympathetic leftist groups or conducted enough membership and fund raising drives. While avoiding being

tied down by corporate grants, they have not developed their own non-profit enterprises or pushed actively for a direct share of revenues that they help to produce as consumers and employees for citizen action purposes.

Campaigns have not been active enough in sharing their tactics and successes with unorganized citizens. Their knowledge of what are more important issues to pursue, which strategies have greater impact on corporate organizations and the pitfalls citizen action can fall into at the hands of mandarins and technocrats would be invaluable to building the citizen action movement further.

Surviving Institutional Deception and Developing Further Independent Citizen Action Bases

Corporate Concepts of Public Participation

Citizen participation and management of the Canadian economy is not accepted by corporate organizations as a basic strategy to build democracy in Canada. Public and private corporate organizations allocate Canada's scarce resources to their own growth needs and are only willing to set up advisory committees to discuss means of increasing the gross national product and to fund information-counselling service groups to advise others on available corporate social services and corporate job opportunities. Corporate democracy is promised on the basis of widespread opportunities within corporate organizations and the countervailing and competitive nature of corporate organizations.

Citizen advice and participation is acceptable if it does not effectively try to change and act on income inequality and corporate exploitation in Canada. Confrontation against the corporate adversary system by those outside corporate channels are labelled as irresponsible activities. Ad hoc regulation, inaccessible information and representative political and legal processes are used as means by mandarins to keep citizens' protests fragmented and organizations weak. Challenges to profiteers, bureaucracies, and technocrats are diffused through government public participation programs. Short term citizen funding for service projects is permissible but paralleled by long range commitments and immense funding to large private corporations.

Citizen campaigns are now facing a major corporate effort to channel their activities into research and hearings under corporate groundrules. Many campaigns, while aware of how citizen action efforts were emasculated in the past decade through government make-work and outreach projects, are not totally aware of the motivations of governments in offering them large grants to undertake research projects (for instance, on environmental impact of economic projects and on aboriginal monetary land claims) and to participate in public hearings (for instance, on utility rates and economic projects' development).

Campaign energies are being diverted into investigations and interventions whose terms of reference are deliberately limited and whose outcomes are meant to result in a few concessions for

for campaigns. This diversionary strategy is being used by corporate leaders so that they will be able to continue to avoid programs drastically changing income distribution in Canada and to be able to achieve quicker settlements for the go-ahead of a major round of corporate economic activity, primarily in the North.

Public Interest Centres Proposal for Campaigns' Development

Citizen campaigns will have to avoid being deceived by corporate participation programs and had better decide now on how best to survive as a permanent independent force in Canada.

It is towards this end of desiring to see citizen campaigns survive that as a first stage proposal a public interest centre framework is suggested for their developing more effective, independent permanent structures.

The public interest centre notion is in part based on the consumer, welfare, and environmental advocacy centres developing in Canada and the citizen action groups promoted by Nader's people in the United States. It is seen as a means for citizen-consumer campaigns as well as other groups such as militant labour and professional groups to adopt to strengthen citizen action as a workable permanent force for monitoring the Canadian economy and promoting a citizen-run economy. It is an option to direct government and corporate control of citizen action.

Public interest centres would perform the following functions:

- a) clearinghouse function - means of campaigners conveying and exchanging information on local citizen action projects.
- b) financial counselling functions - means of campaigners identifying available community resources and raising funds for citizen action projects.
- c) investigatory function - means of campaigners researching areas of interest for citizen action projects.
- d) "whistle blowing" function - means of campaigners encouraging inside corporate contacts to provide help to campaigning.
- e) monitoring function - means of campaigners reviewing Canadian corporate law and corporate activities in Canada.
- f) intervention function - means of campaigners representing, organizing and advocating the citizen interest in the Canadian economy.
- g) training function - means of campaigners training Canadians to be involved in the economy.

Public interest centres would be set up as incorporated non-profit groups, with membership open to local citizens and leadership provided by elected officers. The financing for centres would come from membership fees, citizen foundations and if possible, from a special adopted one per cent direct local tax levy. The majority of funds would go in the building of a network of people carrying out projects rather than into offices, buildings and structures. Centres would, however, require paid staff coordinators though much of the work and expertise needed for projects would come from voluntary help. Centres would ensure full disclosure

of their finances and hold periodic public meetings. Organizing centres will require flexibility and a great deal of work.

Centres would continue existing citizen campaigns' projects. Future projects would likely involve such issues as utility services, energy resource allocation, nuclear plant development, tax assessment, environmental protection, transportation policy, sports franchises, computer data banks, and educational reform.

Campaigns will want to look at the proposed public interest centre base as well as other alternatives as a first stage to constructing a citizen-run economy. They may, for instance, also wish to experiment with community development corporations and multi-cooperative enterprises or push for the use of referendums, class actions, citizen hearings, proxy actions and social indicators. Furthermore, they may adopt approaches developed in other countries against corporate abuse such as the Scandinavian ombudsman watchdog agencies, the Yugoslavian workers participation and management ventures, the Peruvian land reform program, the Cuban nationalization program and the counter trading bloc association of the Arab nations.

Citizen campaigns in Canada face powerful corporate forces promoting a growth oriented adversary political economy. They seek a real dialogue with the Canadian public and an acceleration of social change. The campaigns are promoting a conserved society and

a participatory economy, ideas that have increasingly powerful appeal to individuals citizens.

Campaigns are the most relevant citizen action movement to date despite increasing efforts of corporate powers to diffuse their energies and prevent their permanency. They are not a passing fad or mere harassment campaigns and are providing leadership for the non-profit voluntary sector in Canadian society.

Canadians are fed up with corporate greed, unresponsive bureaucracies and a closed elite decision making system. Citizen campaigns' future acceptance as essential and permanent parts of the Canadian economy requires active support from citizens and progressive groups now.