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OttawaWatch 125: Passing the torch

By Lloyd Mackey

A personal note with respect to Habitat for Humanity: For several years, during this period, my brother, Barry Mackey, who spent much of his adult life in Christian faith-based relief and development work, was in India with HfH, as its south Asia coordinator. And, Edna and I had hoped, in 2006, to visit India to cover am HfH “build” led by former US president Jimmy Carter, and to have a close look as Barry’s working “turf.” A little thing called triple bypass surgery got in the way, but it also contributed in part at least to the fact that, at 81, in 2021, I am still alive and kicking.

Governor-general Michaëlle Jean is Habitat for Humanity’s (HfH) new Canadian version of former US president Jimmy Carter.

Former governor-general Ed Schreyer (who served 1979-84 in that role, after an earlier stint as Manitoba’s NDP premier) has been known for the past two decades for his work as Canadian patron for HfH, the Christian-rooted entrepreneurial non-profit housing group that is now working in 93 countries. He was serving in Canada’s Habitat, in a similar role as does Jimmy Carter, in the United States and for certain international events.

Schreyer’s role was to turn up at Habitat “builds” in various cities throughout Canada, to swing a hammer, meet the press and generally raise morale for hundreds of on-site volunteer workers. A “build” is the insiders’ term used to describe a one-week event in a city where Habitat would work with the people who had been chosen to provide “sweat equity” in exchange for having a home-of-their-own for themselves and their family.

The former GG had returned to Ottawa for a hot-hazy-humid week in July, 2001, in his role as patron, for a build that provided nine families, at the time, with new homes, in the South Keys area.

Now, this week, on June 13, he was back again, to pass the torch – the Habitat patron role – to his successor (five times removed). And, in her ebullient manner, Jean promised to be impatient and to get things done – a potentially interesting contrast to Schreyer’s gentle and grandfatherly style of mentorship.

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In being “impatient”, Jean will have opportunity to work with a new relationship that Habitat is developing, with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, in assisting aboriginal people to acquire housing through the Habitat process. The CMHC-HfH arrangement is initially set up to run for three years.

As of Ottawa *Watch* deadline time, I had not received the press release that carefully unwraps the new aboriginal housing arrangement. But its timing is interesting, coming just a few days after Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice and Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine – with a little congenial help from Prime Minister Stephen Harper – announced a major initiative in speeding up the settling of outstanding aboriginal land claims.

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The Prentice-Fontaine announcement was largely overshadowed around Ottawa by the emerging dispute between the feds and three provinces over the equalization formula and its relationship to fossil fuel revenues accruing to those provinces – Saskatchewan, Newfoundland/Labrador and Nova Scotia.

I took to observing fairly closely both the event itself – including the resignation of Nova Scotia MP Bill Casey from the Conservative caucus – and the way Harper handled it.

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The main controversy during this interlude has related to a headline in the *National Post* which provocatively translated Harper's suggestion that the equalization issue could be tested in court, into an assertion that he had said "Sue me!"

As nearly as I can tell, he said nothing of the sort, but the phrase took on a life of its own, being repeated close to two dozens times, by my own count, by folk on the opposition benches in the House of Commons and the talking heads on various political analysis television shows.

It was left to Mike Duffy of CTV to carefully explain that Harper was probably being much more nuanced and conciliatory than he was given credit for. Duffy posited that Harper was suggesting, albeit somewhat clumsily, that a reference to the wisdom of the Supreme Court could provide useful guidance on such matters as contract law and constitutional responsibility. In other words: a meditative – rather than an adversarial – approach.

I had a personal axe to grind in all this, because my book, *Stephen Harper, the Case for Collaborative Governance*, was a finalist in the Write! Canada Christian writing awards held even while I was attending at the Habitat reception at Rideau Hall. While the book was not named the winner in the non-fiction life stories book category at the awards, I had been somewhat in bated breath, wondering if Harper was going to ignore my sage advice about biblically-based collaborative governance and really mess up this equalization-budget issue.

My conclusion includes some satisfaction, because he has seemingly emerged with a budget that the senate will end up affirming, and a little time for cooler heads to prevail, to work out the fine points for a long term equalization solution. Further, that solution

will hopefully be based on principle and formula, rather than the seemingly more unstable approach of side deals with certain provinces.

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The book that won in the life stories category was *Through Fire and Sea*, Marilyn Meyers' recounting of several years' experience with the Mercy Ships serving several dozen third world ports of call. I look forward to reading it soon.

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