

## Who Cares?

### Creative Responses to Social Obligations – A Dialogue Series

#### **The Governor-General's Roundtable on "The Good City"**

A dialogue with Their Excellencies Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul  
September 22, 2004

On September 22, 2004 a cross-section of Vancouver citizens joined in a dialogue with Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul on how to cultivate "The Good City." This dialogue was the latest in a series of urban visits in which Their Excellencies engaged citizens of several cities in dialogues designed to explore what makes those cities desirable places to live for all their residents.

The Vancouver Good City dialogue, co-sponsored by Simon Fraser University, the Philia Dialogue on Citizenship and PLAN, attracted a broad range of participants. Politicians, planners and business people sat side by side with social workers, artists, activists and residents of Vancouver's Downtown East Side. All spoke passionately about what makes Vancouver work, as well as what needs a lot more work to make Vancouver a better city for all its inhabitants.

Their Excellencies started the discussion by reflecting on the many innovative programs and initiatives they have observed in their tour of Canada's cities. They noted that some of these experiments are more successful than others, but emphasized that results are not always the point. More important is that they are all examples of people becoming involved in their communities, doing things for themselves in the places where they live. And we can learn from what doesn't work as well as what does. By highlighting "the fragility of what we create together as citizens", the Governor-General hopes that these dialogues will both help Canadians understand what is happening in the rest of the country, and enable them to "feel for themselves what's missing and what they want to do more of."

The first half of the discussion was devoted to what is not yet working in Vancouver, and people spoke eloquently about the problems facing our city. High on the list was the issue of homelessness and the desperate need for affordable housing. This led to the larger issue of exclusion: people are excluded due to race, poverty, disability, addiction and so on, and remain isolated in social and/or geographical ghettos. How do we build a strong sense of community and support, and create welcoming neighbourhoods throughout the city?

Ken Lyotier, Executive Director of [United We Can](#) (a successful social enterprise in the Downtown East Side) observed that there is still a certain "immaturity" in how we respond to each other: we haven't yet come to grips with how we accept and make a place for everyone. At the same time, he acknowledged that there is a tension between making a place for everyone and maintaining certain standards of livability. Another person likened the good city to a healthy family where all members are honoured and no

one is treated as “undeserving”. We need to ask ourselves what creates barriers to inclusion for all members of the family, and then work to remove those barriers.

Another issue that was addressed was the myths we live with – notably the great Canadian myth that we’re new, young, starting from scratch. But, as several people pointed out, this ignores the deep cultural roots that have been here for centuries – rich native traditions about how to live in balance with each other and our environment. They argued that the only way to build a truly healthy city is for the dominant culture to stop seeing itself as “caretakers” and to recognize the presence, wisdom and contributions of Canada’s First People.

Many other problems were also identified in the course of the discussion: inadequate resources allocated to cities; the need for better transit solutions; increasing income disparity among Vancouver’s citizens; racism, sexism and homophobia; marginalization of art and artists. A common thread seemed to underlie all the disparate issues, however: that what makes a good city is a profound sense of interconnection – the recognition that what helps or hurts any one of us helps or hurts us all. And that when that empathy is absent, things fall apart.

The intention was to devote the second half of the dialogue to what *is* working in Vancouver. Various members of the audience expressed pride in Vancouver’s great leadership in literacy, in the quality and diversity of our social housing, in the strides we have made in public transit, in the fact that Vancouver is one of the most accessible cities in the world for people with disabilities. However, there was a tendency to slip back into what’s wrong, and to reiterate what is still lacking rather than to celebrate what we have.

Perhaps the most positive observation was a comment Ken Lyotier made earlier that linked “what works” with “what doesn’t work” in a thoughtful and insightful way. “It’s interesting,” Ken said, “to look at what we think is not working well in our city – in part because what we can develop some agreement about as citizens as to what’s not working well, and are willing to work on to change, are potentially our best assets. What we seem to be failing in or not being effective in – if we’re able to come to grips with those things – those become our things to celebrate.”