

**7th Annual Trudeau Conference on Public Policy 2010  
Winnipeg, November 18-20, 2010**

**“Equal in dignity:  
Human rights and the passage of generations”**

Affirming human dignity is an immense, daunting and never-ending pursuit. There are no givens, and each generation finds new reasons for concern and indignation: rights ignored, freedoms trampled, treaties violated, lies propagated, cultures damaged. Each generation must also learn for itself how to defend and protect human rights and human dignity, forging its own tools and devising its own language – through laws, policies or direct action.

Since its creation, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation has actively supported research and critical reflection into human rights and dignity. The Foundation’s Seventh Trudeau Conference on Public Policy will give participants the opportunity to examine and assess successive approaches to rights and freedoms. The presentations and discussions will centre on efforts to protect and promote fundamental rights, in Canada and elsewhere around the world, and examine the lessons drawn from experience.

It is said that human rights were defined in three successive waves, beginning with political and civil rights, followed by economic and social rights and finally by cultural or “collective” rights, which encompass concepts such as development, peace and the environment. This is an appealing idea that implies a continuous progress of the values of freedom and solidarity. Declarations, pacts and other charters become the symbols of humanity’s long march toward the full affirmation of fundamental rights, with each generation adding to the accomplishments of the generation before it.

This view is not without merit. In Canada, behaviour that was once accepted although it ran counter to human rights and dignity is now the object of widespread opprobrium. Certainly, the progressive awakening of our collective conscience has been the result of endless struggles on the part of groups targeted by discrimination and disdain. But there is little doubt that the enshrinement of rights and freedoms in solemn texts such as the Canadian Bill of Rights or the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, coupled with subsequent court decisions, also played a critical role in educating citizens and legislators. The term “the Charter generation” even refers to Canadians born after 1982, in a society where democratic ideals coincide in principle with the affirmation of extensive rights and freedoms.

Yet this same generation is confronted today with the prickly problem of building a society where cultural pluralism, established by those same founding texts, may repeatedly call into question hard-won rights, such as the equality of men and women, or freedom of expression. They are also discovering that some political and social needs elude codification under such charters and other legal instruments, raising the question of their relevance. Finally, the Charter generation cannot fail to see that at the level of the

world community, despite a few deservedly renowned successes, an effective and sustainable agreement on shared values is still along way off.

By giving the floor to stakeholders who have directly and personally contributed to the advent of a regime of rights and freedoms, and also to voices still clamouring for a just society, it should be possible to take stock of both the advances made in recent decades and the challenges still left to tackle. As stated, it is essential to make room for law and policy, and also for the national and international aspects of the major human rights issues.

One of the original aspects of the Conference, reflecting the Foundation's constant desire to pursue dialogue among the disciplines, is that it will take into consideration the effects of demographics on our conception of rights and human dignity. This demands, first of all, special attention to the passage of generations, with all its new questions and new solutions. We know, for example, that social and political human rights action – be it to denounce, convince or mobilize – relies increasingly on technologies that were once inconceivable. On the other hand, we do not know whether this proliferation of tools has resulted in proportional progress in the scale of accomplishments or even in terms of awareness.

Next we need a wider investigation into the effects of the deep transformation of the social and human fabric of Canadian society, under the combined effect of aging and cultural diversification. This could completely overturn our approach to rights, and some concepts believed inviolable may already need to be re-examined. This evolution is not necessarily negative. For the past few decades, we have been celebrating the emergence of a distinct corpus of Canadian Aboriginal Law, contributing to the structuring of an authentic regime of legal and judicial pluralism, open to the diversity of traditions and interpretations.

The different issues raised by this year's theme will be examined by a prestigious group of Canadian and international experts, recruited from the best researchers and the most ground-breaking practitioners. As has become the custom, participants will be offered the opportunity to discuss with them through a series of expert dialogues which have become the trademark of the Trudeau Conferences.