

# Bringing the **Fight** for the **Right to Water** to the United Nations

In September, Council of Canadians National Chairperson Maude Barlow received the prestigious honour of being named Senior Advisor on Water Issues to the President of the United Nations. In her role, Maude will be working with UN President Father Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann on international water issues, and continuing the work to have water recognized as a human right. She travelled to New York in December to deliver a speech pressing the urgent need for a UN declaration on the Right to Water as part of the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Human Rights Declaration. *Canadian Perspectives* spoke with Maude recently about her appointment.

## **CP: How did you feel when you found out about your appointment?**

**Maude:** I felt wonderful and humbled. I have, of course, been critical of the UN and the slow pace of progress on the right to water there as well as the strong influence of the water corporations inside the UN itself. But when Father Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, who is deeply committed to the poor and oppressed of the world, asked me to advise him on how to move this issue forward at the UN and globally, I jumped at the chance.

## **CP: What do you hope to achieve during your tenure?**

**Maude:** I hope to accomplish three things: to raise awareness of the global water crisis, both ecological and human, inside the General Assembly itself; to challenge the undue influence of the big water corporations and the World Water Council on UN decision making around water; and to advance the campaign for a right to water covenant through both a General Assembly resolution and at the Human Rights



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Council, which is currently studying the issue.

## **CP: Why is the issue of water as a human right important?**

**Maude:** If the United Nations were to adopt a right to water covenant tomorrow, there would still be huge problems in the world around water. But the right resolution would clearly define water as a public trust and a human right above its commercial status and clarify that every nation on earth must come up with a plan of action to deliver safe, clean drinking water to its people. It would be a powerful symbol of hope and give grassroots communities around the world a new tool in their struggle for water justice.

## **CP: How has the Canadian government been doing on this issue?**

**Maude:** Shamefully! Both the former Liberal government and the current Harper government refuse to support the right to water at the United Nations. Both say it is because they

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fear that such a right might force Canada to export its water to the U.S. This is patently false. A codified UN right is between a government and its own people and could never be used to force governments to give

up control of their resources. The real reason Canada opposes this right is more likely because both parties support NAFTA, which defines water as a commodity, and they know that defining it as a right would contradict their trade obligations.

## **CP: How should people, countries, and – even more broadly – the world view water?**

**Maude:** Water is a public trust. This means that no one owns water in a jurisdiction but rather that it belongs to a nation’s citizens, the ecosystem and the future. Enough must be set aside to ensure health of the ecosystem and the hydrologic cycle as well as for basic needs and local food production. A permitting system must be used for all commercial use of water that must only ever be allocated in a sustainable fashion. The twin pillars of conservation and justice must guide all our decisions about water.

To read the full text of Maude’s recent speech to the UN panel on Emerging Issues, visit [www.canadians.org](http://www.canadians.org).