

Meet John Cartwright, the Council of Canadians Board of Directors' new Chairperson



John Cartwright is a long-time labour leader and social justice advocate. He was elected Chairperson of the Council of Canadians at the Annual Members Meeting in June 2019. He holds the busy position of the President of the Toronto & York Region Labour Council, representing 200,000 union members who work in every sector of the economy. A carpenter by trade, he led the Toronto Building Trades for a decade before taking his role with the Labour Council. He spoke recently with *Canadian Perspectives* about his hopes for the Council of Canadians in the coming years.

CP: How long have you been involved with the Council of Canadians?

I attended one of the founding meetings that led to the creation of the Council in 1985, and have been a supporter ever since.

CP: What made you want to become Chairperson of the Council's Board of Directors?

I was honoured to join the Board because of the Council's vision for the future of Canada. I have always admired Maude Barlow's role in this country and internationally. I hope that my experience in struggles for social, racial and climate justice can help inform the work of the Board. The Council has gone through some difficult times, but we are able to move forward together. I am committed to help a process of renewing and rebuilding the strength of the Council, and to ensure we engage everyone in shaping our collective future.

CP: What role do you think the Council has in civil society?

There are many organizations focused on specific issues, but few with the breadth of analysis and campaigns that we have undertaken. As a non-partisan organization we can work across party lines. We have chapters in cities and towns across the country, with a proven track record of community leadership. And we have a great staff team in Ottawa and across Canada who know how to lead campaigns. We are a trusted ally on many issues, and are well-placed to convene a range of organizations around a common approach to this minority government. Civil society should be part of the "balance of power" determining the political agenda of Canada, pressuring Members of Parliament and parties to enact a progressive legislative agenda.

CP: Why do you think people should be involved?

I feel that every one of us should use their skills to work for a just society. That can happen in so many ways: signing petitions, writing letters, community organizing, lobbying politicians, establishing Blue Communities, developing campaigns, attending demonstrations, supporting struggles of Indigenous peoples, and whatever other actions our creative ideas can generate. Each of us has a role to play in this journey to build a better world.

CP: What challenges do you see ahead?

The climate emergency is directly related to the growing levels of inequality and corporate power in our globalized economy. Deepening our understanding of

how to challenge the agenda of the 1% will be crucial to our effectiveness. We have to keep learning from each other as we shape our campaigns in coming years. Many of us were drawn to the Council in the fight against free trade, so we need to find ways to engage younger activists as well as diverse communities across the country.

CP: The Council of Canadians will be celebrating 35 years of activism next year, why do you think the organization has had such staying power?

We have had amazing leaders and the support of tens of thousands of donors, activists, chapter members and allies from coast-to-coast. Thanks to the financial contributions of those people we have maintained our independence from government or corporate funding and influence. We have presented a cohesive program for social justice that rings true with most Canadians. Maude has been an inspiring voice locally and across the globe. Our focus – on the Canada we want – allows people of all backgrounds to see their values reflected in our work.

CP: Is there anything else you want to add?

I want to honour everyone who has been involved in the Council of Canadians since its inception. Even if someone was only active for a brief period of time, it has made a difference. For those who have dedicated so much of their life's work to the Council, I want to express our deepest gratitude. And to those who wish to join us for the future I want to extend a warm welcome!