



Mel Hurtig and Maude Barlow posed for a picture at the Council of Canadians' annual conference in Toronto in 2000.

# Mel Hurtig's Passion for Justice Still Guides Us

by Maude Barlow

the fabulous *Canadian Encyclopedia*, and write a series of bestselling books, the last a scathing account of the Harper years in power.

Together, we founded the Council of Canadians, whose mandate included support for Canadian culture, a Canadian industrial strategy, reduced foreign ownership, better and more careful use of natural resources, and a progressive foreign policy that included multilateral (fair) trade, a strengthened United Nations, de-escalation of tensions between the superpowers, and a global arms control deal. Although I took over the role of chair in 1988, Mel continued to act as friend and mentor for many years, helping to create what is now one of Canada's most vibrant social and environmental justice organizations with more than 100,000 members and supporters.

Mel continued to cross this great country, speaking to thousands of people, increasingly addressing another passion – that of the growing inequality in Canadian society. Just as he predicted when we founded the Council, our social security net became frayed and Mel was deeply affected by the poverty, especially among the young, he saw on his travels. His 1999 book *Pay the Rent or Feed the Kids* was a cry from his heart asking how child poverty could exist in a country as blessed with wealth as Canada.

We had our disagreements, of course. I did not support the founding of the National Party in 1992, fearing a split of the anti-NAFTA vote in the upcoming election. I felt our movement needed to remain non-partisan and attempt to influence policy makers across the board. I also moved the Council of Canadians away from its nationalist roots, to one critiquing economic globalization, making common cause with people and communities struggling for justice around the world. I would point out to Mel that not all aggressive corporations

were American and remind him that Canada's mining companies operating in the global South have the worst reputation in the world for human rights and environmental violations.

Where we never differed was in our views on free trade and how these deals serve the interests of transnational corporations and limit the right of governments to protect workers, communities or the environment. Those who extol the benefits of NAFTA can never explain the dramatic loss of manufacturing jobs, the growing income gap or Canada's continued trade deficit since that deal was signed.

A recent poll found that only one in four Canadians support NAFTA, and resistance to the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) is very strong in Europe. Both major U.S. parties now oppose the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a deal Mel was fighting right up to the end of his life.

Mel Hurtig's passion for justice never left him. I love the fact that hours before his death in a Vancouver hospital, his daughters, Barbara, Jane, Gillian and Leslie, told their father that the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women had finally been announced. Mel smiled and said, "Bravo! It's about time."

Mel's legacy is his challenge to all of us who live in this country: if, with all our natural wealth, financial resources and educated population, we in Canada cannot create a truly just and sustainable society, who can? His spirit lives on to guide us on this path.

*In honour of the family's wishes, a memorial fund has been set up to celebrate Mel Hurtig's life and legacy. If you would like make a donation, please call us at 1-800-387-7177, visit [www.canadians/mel](http://www.canadians/mel) or mail your gift to 300-251 Bank Street, Ottawa, ON K2P 1X3.*

**M**el Hurtig was a force of nature. I first met Mel in the fall of 1985, when he invited me to a series of meetings to discuss the coming Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. There I met the people I most admired in our country – Bob White, Grace Hartman, David Suzuki, Pierre Berton, Walter Gordon, Sheila Copps, Mel Watkins, Stephen Clarkson, Christina McCall, Stephen Lewis, Duncan Cameron, Doris Anderson, Margaret Atwood and many others, all concerned that a deal with Ronald Reagan's America would threaten our social programs, our ability to control our natural resources and culture, and our right to an independent foreign policy.

How could you not love a man who rented a Twin Otter airplane to drop a Canadian flag on the American icebreaker Polar Sea when it entered the Northwest Passage without permission from our government?

Mel's passion for Canada was forged in his early years as an Edmonton bookstore owner and publisher. He was shocked to find how little space there was for Canadian literature, films, books and music and how shallow the teaching of Canadian culture and history was in many schools and universities. This passion led him to help form the Committee for an Independent Canada (which in turn influenced Canadian cultural policy), create