

New Alliance Needed for Infrastructure

Gord Hume...June 2013

As Canada's municipal infrastructure deficit gets larger and larger, it is time to look for bold new solutions.

Last week, delegates from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba gathered in Victoria for the annual CUPE Western Canadian conference. I was very honoured to be their opening keynote speaker.

There were a lot of really smart civic union leaders in the ballroom of the hotel. It was obvious there was a genuine commitment to building, re-shaping, developing, operating and supporting strong, healthy, sustainable, dynamic and creative communities.

I talked about the growth of new global cities in Asia, India, Africa and other parts of the world. The largest migration in the history of the world that is occurring right now. The need for different ways of financing Canadian towns and cities. And, importantly, the growing infrastructure deficit that every municipality in this country is facing.

That will be exacerbated by the terrible flooding in Alberta, with the waves of water moving towards Saskatchewan and beyond. The cost, both public and private, to re-build from the devastation will take an extraordinary commitment and huge resources from all orders of government, and the private sector.

The infrastructure problems are growing every day in North America, yet in Canada we continue to fall behind. There isn't a serious national discussion going on about the problems, and there are scattered messages from various jurisdictions across the country. Surely it is time for us to come together as a nation and face up to the realities of this growing economic reality and burden.

It remains brutally apparent that however many hundreds of billions of dollars must be invested cannot come solely from the local property tax. It is equally apparent that this issue does not have the attention of senior orders of government.

One of my proposals at the Victoria CUPE convention was for public sector unions to come together on this issue with strong mayors and the private sector. That would create a powerful new voice that surely would get the attention of cabinet ministers.

Clearly public sector unions are not going to agree with every position that I take, just as I don't agree with every position the unions take. But sometimes there are larger issues that supersede other considerations, and repairing, rebuilding and growing our communities in an intelligent and environmentally responsible manner just makes great sense.

The response from the CUPE delegates was enthusiastic. In fact, they honoured me with a standing ovation at the end of my speech. In comments to me from delegates across Western Canada it became obvious that there is an open desire to see their municipalities be sustainable, competitive and offer a great quality of life. This is an intelligent and thoughtful response from the public sector members, and does them great credit.

Today's smart, modern union leadership aligning with strong mayors and municipal leaders and business and industry leaders also concerned about municipal infrastructure would result in a potent and forceful voice for change in how we finance communities and our infrastructure needs.

One of the biggest concerns I have about this issue is the lack of urgency across the country about finding and implementing solutions. We're not forcing the public debate the way it demands. And with all due respect to the federal government, the \$53 billion over 10 years it has announced a few times is simply not sufficient.

Just as wonderful Centennial projects were built across the country in 1967 for Canada's 100th birthday as a nation, maybe 2017 should become the trigger for a great national re-building. We need to have government leaders from all orders commit to improving and investing in our infrastructure needs. We need the private sector to step up and become partners and investors. And we need our public sector unions to join a new coalition to battle for resolving this crucial national challenge.

My view coming out of the Western Canadian CUPE conference is that public sector union leadership today has the intelligence, courage and vision to explore such a partnership. It could be a huge step forward, and would present other orders of government with a united and trenchant voice to finally confront Canada's municipal infrastructure deficit.