

Speech to the Ontario Society of Senior Citizens Organizations on the occasion of their 20th Anniversary

By Carol Goar

Thank you very much for allowing me to share your 20th anniversary. It is a genuine honour to be here.

You have a lot to be proud of today. You've built a strong, enduring organization out of what began as a pension protest. You've given seniors in Ontario a voice, a way to come together to get things done and a forum for ideas and fellowship. And you've stayed the course through one of the most trying periods in Canadian politics.

Please accept my congratulations and best wishes for 20 more productive years.

One of the reasons I was delighted to accept your invitation to speak at this event is that seniors are my favourite readers. They take the time to think about what I've written. And many take the time to respond. My most interesting mail and e-mail comes from people of your generation.

I also like writing stories about seniors, as some of you who read the Toronto Star will know.

Last week, I wrote about a retired real estate agent named Marilyn Luxton in Oakville, who's on a one-woman crusade to get the defence department to open its unused military housing to low-income families.

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote about a retired dentist named Irwin Lightman in North York who won't rest until he gets the provincial health ministry to provide dental care in nursing homes.

And back in October, I wrote about a retired Bell Canada manager named Dan Braniff in Collingwood, who has launched what he calls an old geezers' tax revolt. He is determined to get Ottawa to stop penalizing married pensioners. I'm happy to report that he's met the Prime Minister and that his support among seniors is growing by leaps and bounds.

I'm sure that many of you have causes that are just as worthwhile and stories that are just as compelling. And that's what I'd like to talk about today; the need to stand up for what you believe in and speak out on issues that matter.

I know it's hard work. I know politicians can seem deaf. And I know there are all kinds of professional lobbyists out there who have more money and political connections than you ever will.

But you have two things that trump their blackberries and expense accounts and pseudo sophistication.

The first is power at the ballot box. Seniors vote in large numbers. You're one of the few groups that still do.

The second is moral authority. You're the guardians of the values that built this country. You understand courage and sacrifice and being part of something larger than yourself in a way that my generation – I regret to say – does not.

Let me elaborate on that. I grew up hearing stories about the Great Depression and the Second World War. My parents are from southern Saskatchewan, the area known as the Palliser Triangle. As children, they watched blinding dust storms blow away whole fields of topsoil, leaving farmers with nothing.

Hobos used to show up at my grandparents' door, begging for something to eat. It wouldn't have occurred to my grandmother to turn them away. One of the first lessons she taught my mother was that you shared whatever you could spare and you didn't judge people who needed a meal or a helping hand.

I asked my father, once, if he was poor during the Great Depression. He had to think about it for a minute. "I guess I was," he told me. "But everybody else was too, so we didn't think about. We just got on with life."

I find it hard to imagine any young person saying that now.

Just as the depression was beginning to loosen its grip, when Canada entered the Second World War. My mother, who worked part-time in the general store in Assiniboia, became something of an expert on rationing and victory bonds. My father enlisted in the air force as soon as he was old enough.

It wouldn't have crossed their minds to put personal comfort before their country's call. Like everybody else they knew, they contributed to the war effort. Like the rest of their generation, they put their own future on hold for as long as they were needed.

Adversity is a harsh teacher, but it breeds great strength in those who survive it. The children of the depression and the Second World War turned out to be resilient and public-spirited adults.

It was my good fortune to be born when that generation was in charge. And it was Canada's good fortune that they built their values right into the country's social and political structures.

Take our progressive tax system. That grew out of their understanding that a healthy society can't afford huge inequities in wealth and status. When the chips are down, everybody's efforts are needed.

Take our social programs. They grew out of their understanding that pooling the risks and rewards of citizenship is the best way to get through hard times. They'd seen how vulnerable individuals are on their own.

Take our extensive network of public universities. That grew out of their belief in a better tomorrow, forged in the comradeship of war. They wanted to give all of Canada's children the opportunities they never had.

Take our traditionally high household savings rate, our once-vibrant political debates, our universal pensions and baby bonuses.

I suspect all of you know where I'm going next. Every one of those achievements is either slipping away or at risk of being lost.

For the last 20 years, the gap between rich and poor has been widening at an accelerating rate. Some social commentators think it has become unbridgeable.

Our tax system is no longer an equalizing force. It has been flattened by successive governments and larded with so many loopholes that the affluent have no difficulty amassing an ever-greater share of the nation's wealth, while the poor fall further and further behind.

Our post-secondary institutions are no longer accessible to kids from lower and middle-income families. In theory, they're open to all. In fact, many students from working class backgrounds are simply not willing to take on crushing debts to go to university or college.

Our welfare programs don't even pretend to be stigma-free. Anyone who applies for social assistance in Ontario is put through a humiliating process. To receive public support, they have to liquidate their assets, subject their families to government scrutiny and lay bare every facet of their private life.

Our voter turnout is embarrassingly low. In the last election, only 60.5 per cent of those eligible to cast ballots, bothered. That's down from almost 80 per cent in the late '50s and early '60s.

In short, we are squandering the inheritance that your generation left in our trust. And it troubles me deeply.

I don't want to live in a country where elections are irrelevant; where poverty is a life sentence; where help comes with a dollop shame; and where words such as honour

and sacrifice are pulled out of a dusty corner of our consciousness on Remembrance Day, then hurriedly stuffed back in.

But how do we get back on track?

I hope it won't take another economic cataclysm or a world war to do it. On my bad days, I think it might.

On my better days, I see glimmers of hope: people working to make their communities better, volunteers stepping forward to solve problems that governments ignore, citizens saying they'd rather have a durable public health care system than a tax cut; neighbours pitching in to help one another.

Your generation, as I said earlier, does this very well. Mine is less good. And our children, at least those lucky enough to be born in this country, are separated by more than half a century from nation-wrenching adversity.

We need your voices to remind us what character is. I don't think young people growing up today can conceive of going without meat or sugar or butter for years. I don't think they understand the kind of courage it took to climb into a Tiger Moth or say good-bye to a fiancé who might not return. I find it profoundly sad that they define bravery by the number of aliens they can kill in a video game or the respect they can get by brandishing a stolen gun.

We need your good sense to remind us that negativity doesn't get a society very far. Nobody had the luxury of being fashionably cynical during the depression. Nobody had time to obsess over inconsequential problems when there was a war to fight.

We need your experience to remind us that the way to tackle daunting problems is to work together. Too many of us seem to have bought into the idea that self-interest is all we need to get ahead. Yet we wonder why our streets aren't as safe as they used to be, our communities aren't as friendly as they used to be and our society isn't as cohesive as it used to be.

Finally, we need your advocacy to remind us that that battle for a just society must go on, even if our political leaders can't see beyond the next election and our public discourse never seems to rise above scandal and petty partisanship.

I understand that you've established the Dan Benedict Memorial Award to pay tribute to a senior who has made an extraordinary contribution to the campaign for social justice. Obviously you don't need me to tell you how important it is to put your principles into practice.

So what I'll say instead is thank you for the example you've set. And please stay involved. My generation needs guidance. Our kids need role models. Our politicians need all the sound advice they can get.

I always smile when I hear the term 'golden years.' It makes me think of a contented pensioner, sitting on a dock or a rocking chair watching the world go by.

Most of the seniors I know aren't like that at all. They're active, engaged in the life of their community and determined not to let this country go adrift. They read the newspaper, volunteer and vote. They wake up in the morning with a hundred things to do. They'd rather, as my grandfather memorably put it, burn out than rust out.

It is wonderful to see so many of you here today, proving me right and keeping alive the values that make me proud to be Canadian.

Thank you very much.