Opinion: Knowing is half the battle – Modernize the Right to Information Act

By DANIEL LÉGÈRE

In January, Green Party Leader David Coon showed us all how difficult it can be to twist the arm of government to disclose a public-private partnership (P3) contract with the private nursing home company, Shannex. The politician has to take the province to the court to know where taxpayer money is going. The action is required because the Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act does not yet expressly force government to disclose the details of the P3 contracts.

While the Green Party and the NDP have long advocated modernization, the Liberal and Conservative parties have kept the Act toothless. In our province, privatization and P3 contracts are rarely subjected to public scrutiny before they are a done deal. This has been shown again recently with the Medavie and Sodexo deals.

Obstacles to transparency are benefiting those trying to “sell” public-private partnerships, contracting out and other pro-corporate schemes to the public. Without proper information, the public can and will be misled.

Isn’t it time the government upheld and expanded the public’s right to know where their money is really going, before the deals are signed?

Our lawmakers should implement the recommendations in the 2017 Columbia Institute report titled Canada Infrastructure Bank’s and the Public’s Right to Know, to improve transparency into the private delivery of public services that states:

1. Private entities delivering substantial public functions or services, or receiving substantial government funding to carry out public functions or services, should be subject to access to information legislation.

2. Canadian jurisdictions should adopt a policy of prompt and full proactive disclosure of all procurement records, including preliminary analyses, business case documents, successful and unsuccessful bids, records, including preliminary analyses, business case documents, successful and unsuccessful bids, evaluations of bids, and contracts.

3. Canadian jurisdictions should move to a discretionary standard for the release of information that has gone before Cabinets or Cabinet committees. Information commissioners should be given access to these documents and the ability to rule on whether such documents should be released.

Any party claiming to value democracy should act to modernize the Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act. In the end, it’s up to the legislators to fix the laws to prioritize the interests of the public over corporate profits.

Daniel Léger is the president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) New Brunswick, the province’s largest union. With around 30,000 members across the province, CUPE represents workers in health care, education, municipalities, universities, social services, transportation and nursing homes.

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Fredericton group takes action to stop deportation of former child refugee

By MADISON MCLAUGHLIN

Two dozen people gathered outside Fredericton MP Matt DeCourcey’s office on January 15 to demand that Canada let Abdoulkader Abdi stay in Canada. On the same day, Abdoul was released from an immigration detention centre outside of Toronto and moved to a halfway house in Toronto. Supporters of Abdoul vow to keep fighting until deportation proceedings against him are stopped. Photo by Tracy Glynn.

Despite the freezing temperatures, members of the Fredericton chapter of No One is Illegal stood outside of MP Matt DeCourcey’s office on January 15. Their goal: deliver a letter to DeCourcey urging him to take action to stop the deportation of Abdoulkader Abdi on the day that Abdi was set to appear before his second detention review hearing.

“I think it’s important for people to be here today to show our MP, Matt DeCourcey, and other representatives of the Canadian government that we aren’t just going to sit by and let this happen,” said Nathan Gullison, a member of No One is Illegal and a St. Thomas University student.

Supporters celebrated the news that Abdi, 24, was being released from the Maplehurst Immigration Detention Centre and being transferred to a halfway house in Toronto but they vow to keep working to support Abdi until the threat of his deportation is over.

Abdi is a Somali refugee who came to Canada as a child. He was put into the Nova Scotia foster care system which failed to make a citizenship claim for him. Four years ago Abdi was imprisoned for committing an aggravated assault. It was during his release in early January that the Canadian Border Services Agency informed him that he was at risk for deportation. This has left many Canadians believing that the Border Services Agency informed him that he was at risk for deportation.

Abdi’s older sister, Fatouma, has been speaking out about the abuse they both experienced within the foster care system. She told CBC that instances such as being pulled out of school, moving to over 20 different foster homes, and physical and emotional abuse all occurred while under care of the Nova Scotia government.

Abdi’s story shows a major gap within the Canadian foster care system affecting immigrant children. This is a message that No One is Illegal (NOII) wants to spread. They say Abdi’s case is just one example of the unjust treatment refugee youth receive within foster systems.

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Collective garden in Kouchibouguac Village provides fresh produce to people in need

By DALLAS McQUARRIE

They made that decision because provincial government social assistance rates are so grossly inadequate that people in need, including the disabled and children, are being forced to live in poverty and to go hungry as a result.

NENC’s community garden project manager Gilbert Blanchard serves pie at the Kouchibouguac fall supper featuring fresh produce from the garden. Photo by Dallas McQuarrie.

In just two years, a Kent County community group has given more than 3,000 pounds of fresh garden vegetables, free of charge, to people in need. The vegetables are being grown in a collective garden established in the spring of 2016 by Notre Environnement, Notre Choix (Our Environment, Our Choice) next to the Kouchibouguac Village Senior Citizens Complex.

Notre Environnement, Notre Choix (NENC) is a group of volunteers working to strengthen local communities. Its members are from the Saint-Louis-de-Kent, Kouchibouguac, Saint-Charles and Saint-Ignace regions of Kent County.

Community gardens usually consist of a number of small garden plots assigned to individuals or families who want to grow their own vegetables. The vegetable harvest is often limited for various reasons, including that most people don’t have much gardening knowledge or experience.

NENC’s 4,500 square foot collective garden at Kouchibouguac Village, however, does not have any individual plots. Instead, people participating in the garden work together on the whole garden under the direction of NENC member Gilbert Blanchard.

Of note is the fact that, when planning the garden, NENC members decided that at least 50% of the food produced each year would be given free of charge to people in need.

They made that decision because provincial government social assistance rates are so grossly inadequate that people in need, including the disabled and children, are being forced to live in poverty and to go hungry as a result.

In addition to providing fresh produce for the volunteer gardeners themselves, in just two summers, Blanchard, NENC members, and other volunteers have given more than 1,500 pounds of potatoes, 600 pounds of beans, 700 pounds of tomatoes, 300 pounds of cucumbers, and several hundred pounds of other vegetables, including onions, carrots, beets, corn, radishes, herbs and garlic to people in need.

“We’ve had solid volunteers in the garden and we have an agreement to use the land at the current location through the end of 2019,” Blanchard said. “All sorts of people who need it are getting the food, from farmers who are delivering the fresh vegetables that people need it.”

“We had about 15 or so volunteers in the garden over the two summers the garden has been in operation, and the garden helped 30 families who would otherwise simply not have had fresh produce this year,” as well as NENC and garden volunteers, Blanchard also reports that the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal convent in Saint-Louis-de-Kent also help distribute food.

Next year, Blanchard will be putting what he’s learned about the benefits of collective gardening to work for the Kent Community Inclusion Network (KGIN) as he begins a term on the network’s board of directors.

Colette Lacroix is the Executive Director of the KGIN. When NENC was establishing its garden in 2016, the KGIN helped with the start-up costs, including seed for the first plantings and related garden supplies. As well, volunteers from United Way in Moncton helped build garden boxes for residents of the Kouchibouguac Village Senior Citizens Complex.

Lacroix likes the “teaching garden” concept employed by NENC. She said that having an experienced gardener on hand to help people learn how to garden is an obvious benefit of NENC’s collective approach. “The NENC garden is a very good model,” Lacroix said. “It combines working and learning, and giving and receiving, and that’s good for people in need.”

By next year, the KGIN hopes to have 10 community gardens operating in Kent County, each with its own experienced gardener on hand to help them learn how to garden. “We don’t have 10 food mentors in place next year,” Lacroix said. “Having a food mentor working at each garden will enable people to learn or improve their gardening skills.” She says that “in an ideal world, everybody would garden,” but cautions that a lot remains to be done in confronting the hunger problem in Kent County.

For example, some food banks are only open a few days a week, and food banks lack freezers for storing food. Similarly, most people living in poverty don’t have freezers, and that means they have no means of storing food during the winter months that they produce in summer.

“As well as learning to garden, it’s important to teach people how to process the food they’ve grown,” Lacroix said. “The KGIN has established educational kitchens that teach people about nutrition and how to process fruits and vegetables for storage.”

Lacroix notes that it is difficult to know with any precision how many people are living in poverty in New Brunswick. “We don’t have good statistics about the number of people living in poverty in New Brunswick generally, or Kent County in particular,” she said, “New Brunswick hasn’t yet established its own benchmarks or measurements to determine how many people here are living in poverty.”

Common poverty indicators such as the Low Income Cut Off (LICO) or the Low Income Measure (LIM) show a very serious poverty problem in New Brunswick. From these poverty measures, it’s evident that more than 80,000 New Brunswick citizens are living in deep poverty.

Tackling poverty and related issues such as illiteracy seems to be a low priority for provincial governments in New Brunswick. Provincial inclusion networks are under-funded, and often simply a way for the province to dump its responsibility for dealing with poverty and hunger onto poorly funded volunteer networks.

Despite limited support and inadequate funding from the provincial government, many people do care about others who are hungry and working to change things. NENC, KGIN, and other groups to combat poverty. NENC’s collective garden at Kouchibouguac Village shows what can be done with limited resources.

“Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much,” said Helen Keller.

Dallas McQuarrie is a Kent County-based journalist for the Media Co-op.