

Winnipeg—The New Geneva The Pursuit of Social Justice



Dr. Arthur V. Mauro

I want to thank the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba for the opportunity to participate in this annual event. When I was contacted a number of months ago, I said I would gladly accept, but indicated that my age made making long-term commitments risky. I was told that the committee had considered that possibility and they were prepared to take a chance. I can only assume that the frequent phone

calls during the intervening period, enquiring as to my health, were a sign of deepening friendship and not an assessment of risk.

One of the benefits of advancing age is the ability to give perspective to the past, purpose to the present, and hope for the future. I concluded that my remarks should, in part, relate the Jewish Foundation within the context of the major changes and development of this community. The topic I have chosen is deliberate.

After the First World War, Geneva, a small city in Switzerland, became the location for the League of Nations, the International Court of Justice, and the Red Cross, and is now the headquarters for agencies of the United Nations. It is the city where the Geneva Conventions were signed, dealing with the treatment of non-combatants and prisoners of war. I believe that Winnipeg, both because of its history, existing institutions, and those under development can become the new Geneva. I have chosen as my topic: “Winnipeg—The New Geneva: The Pursuit of Social Justice.”

In 2012, the Museum for Human Rights will be completed and will become an international symbol, projecting the past and continuing global struggle in pursuit of human dignity. For me, it will represent the achievement of this community that has confronted the challenges of discrimination and has chosen respect for diversity and reconciliation over intolerance and conflict. This is reflected in institutions such as the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba, the Winnipeg Foundation, the United Way, and a myriad of other agencies all in pursuit of social justice.

Next year, Manitoba will celebrate 140 years since entry into confederation in 1870. But in the first 50 years as a province, from 1870 to 1920, three issues would test the resolve of this community and resonate for the next 50 years, both provincially and nationally.

The first event was the treatment of Louis Riel. As head of the provisional government, Riel negotiated the terms of the Manitoba Act. It was Riel who was elected to parliament on three occasions but was never allowed to take his seat. In 1885, fifteen years after leading Manitoba into confederation, he was hanged for treason. Four years later, in breach of the Manitoba Act, the legislature of the province stopped publication of legislation and proceedings in French.

The second event, termed the “Catholic School Question,” was caused by the withdrawal of public support for Catholic schools, which had been provided since entry into confederation. This conflict contributed to the defeat of a national government and was temporarily settled by a federal-provincial agreement.

The third event was the general strike of 1919, considered the most influential labour action in Canadian history. Some of the leaders of that strike were charged with seditious conspiracy and were jailed.

In simplistic terms, the Riel issue was a conflict between French Métis and English; the second issue, a conflict between Catholics and Protestants; and the third, a conflict between labour, capital, and immigrants. In each case, confrontation was chosen over conciliation and conflict was resolved by the majority exercising political power without regard for the minority.

I reference these events not to relive history but rather as a bench mark against which we can judge how far this community has developed since those dark days.

It was as if Winnipeg had been destined to test whether a community, so ethnically, economically, and religiously diverse, could survive. And it is this struggle that explains, in part, the development of the Centre for Peace and Justice, the Museum for Human Rights, and the existence of such institutions as the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba.

I had the good fortune of being at the University of Manitoba during what I refer to as the “golden decade” of 1946 – 1956. World War II was over, the economy had

emerged from a searing depression, and federal support for veterans opened the doors of the university to individuals who would otherwise be unable to attend.

There was only one university in Manitoba. As a result, whether you attended the university itself, or the affiliated colleges, you were thrust into a venue where you met and worked with individuals from a variety of social, racial, and religious backgrounds.

I was born and raised in what is now Thunder Bay, Ontario, and I was aware of the existence of racial and religious prejudice but I had not personally experienced the reality of prejudice. The nature of Thunder Bay, a small community, with a number of ethnic groups, eliminated meaningful exposure to real prejudice. It was on my arrival in Winnipeg, in 1946, that I confronted the reality.

The resentments engendered by the three issues that I have referred to still resonate. In addition, there had been a quota on the number of Jewish students admitted to the Faculty of Medicine. There was a “gentlemen’s agreement” as to the sale of property in Tuxedo and restrictions on admissions to certain clubs. It was also difficult for Catholics to obtain certain jobs, particularly in the public sector.

But these factors of race and religion were irrelevant at the University. There was an active interfaith council, a drama club, a glee club, and musical and debating societies, all of which took no notice of race or creed, and the same attitude applied to student government. It was the ability, character, and integrity of the individuals that were valued, not their ethnic, religious or economic backgrounds.

In the 50 years since my generation graduated, the social, economic, and cultural landscapes of Winnipeg and Manitoba have changed dramatically. My belief is that graduates of the University of Manitoba helped bring about that change. And that change was a direct result of our university experience, where individuals from different backgrounds worked together and learned not only to tolerate, but also to respect diversity.

So how have we measured up against the benchmarks? Relative to the conflict between French and English, there is now a monument of Riel on the legislative grounds. We have French immersion classes in our public schools as well as heritage classes in other languages. Since 1979, the proceedings of the Manitoba legislature are published in both French and English.

As to the Catholic School question, the Roblin government introduced shared service legislation. We now have financial support for both parochial and private schools, regardless of religious affiliation.

And in contrast to the antagonistic attitude towards labour and immigrants, reflected in the 1919 strike, we now have laws that enshrine employees’ rights and a conciliatory

attitude towards labour-management relations. In addition, this is a community that welcomes immigrants and celebrates diversity, best reflected in such festivals as Folklorama.

As to the “gentlemen’s agreement,” relative to the purchase of Tuxedo property, suffice it to say that the Asper Campus is in Tuxedo, and the Manitoba Club and the Glendale Golf and Country Club, have joint membership provisions.

I have had the privilege of witnessing and participating in this amazing evolution in which community is not defined solely in terms of economic growth, but rather a community that embraces a broad spectrum of society and where “giving” is a condition of citizenship.

We have reason to be proud of this achievement. But the demands of social justice will not be corrected in a single generation. They require patience and continued commitment.

If it is true that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, history has also taught that tyranny is the penalty for indifference. The world paid an incalculable price for indifference to the racial vandalism of what was, initially, an insignificant group of German fanatics.

So, while we have achieved much, much remains to be done, not only in combating ethnic and religious prejudice, but also in the struggle against the dehumanizing impact of social injustice both at home and abroad.

Here, in Manitoba, we confront the corrosive conditions faced by members of our First Nations, especially on reserves. They must not become forgotten victims of jurisdictional in-fighting.

Nor can we fail to deal with the difficulties faced by immigrants. For many of us in this room, our parents or grandparents faced similar problems in adapting to a new land and a new language.

It is in addressing these problems that agencies such as the Jewish Foundation can act as the conscience of society. I urge you, as friends of the Jewish Foundation, to continue your support for the services it continues to provide.

All our efforts will not solve the historic and continuing wrongs throughout the world. However, our efforts will be a sign that we are not indifferent to these evils. We can take pride in a city that has experienced human conflict and adopted a process for reconciliation.

In my opening remarks I set as my goal “to give perspective to the past, purpose to the present, and hope for the future.”

Now, what of the future? What are the needs of this brave new world of the 21st millennium and what is the role of a new Geneva?

One of the critical factors that confront humanity is the environment and the inequitable consumption of resources. We sometimes forget that we are only life tenants on this

planet and if we breach the terms of that agreement, the lease might not be extended. Here, in Winnipeg, we have the International Institute for Sustainable Development, with international board representation, dealing with this specific problem.

World health is an ever-present concern. The SARS epidemic scare and the current H1N1 threat underline the fact that the protection of health is global rather than local. We have, here in Winnipeg, the International Centre for Infectious Diseases, a world-class facility, dealing with the broad field of research in the area of communicable diseases.

And, if we hope to reach the 22nd century, we must harness the power of education in pursuit of peace. Here, in Winnipeg, we have the Centre for Peace and Justice, with students from Canada, the United States, Kenya, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, Botswana, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Laos, working towards Ph.D.'s in peace and conflict resolution. On completion, they will return to their homes to train teachers and to participate in policy decisions. They will take with them the Winnipeg experience.

In 2012, the Museum for Human Rights will bring physical reality to Winnipeg's role in this human drama. With the opening of the Museum, we should urge the Federal government to locate the Canadian Human Rights Commission here in Winnipeg.

We should pursue the possibility of the United Nations' opening a UNESCO office in Winnipeg, to deal specifically with the issues confronting Aboriginal people around the world.

In short, we have in place the framework that can be built on to profile Winnipeg as a world centre in peace studies and human rights.

Robert Kennedy articulated the credo of those determined to strive for social justice: "Some men see things as they are and ask 'why?' I dream things that never were and ask 'why not?'"

We have been blessed with dreamers in Winnipeg. The dreamers who built wide boulevards and Assiniboine Park; dreamers who built a tunnel from Shoal Lake in Ontario that still provides us with water; dreamers like William Alloway, the Winnipeg banker who founded the first Canadian community foundation, the Winnipeg Foundation. And we have had dreamers like Izzy Asper, who envisioned a temple to human rights, and so long as that structure stands, it will challenge us and the world with the same questions:

Why not humanity instead of brutality?
Why not dignity instead of degradation?
Why not understanding instead of hate?
Why not peace instead of war?

Each of us has an obligation in this pursuit of peace and social justice and if we stand mute in the face of injustice, we stand convicted of the social crime of silence.

As John Donne warned: "Ask not for whom the bell tolls." The bell tolls for you and me. By our actions, we can determine whether that tolling bell is the sound of doom and approaching darkness or the peel of hope and a new dawn. Therein lie both the message and the purpose of the Museum for Human Rights and the Centre for Peace and Justice: that hope will be turned into a process for reconciliation and that committed people of good will can achieve peace and justice.

Winnipeg has been declared the cultural capital of Canada for 2010. To declare Winnipeg the cultural capital of Canada in the field of the visual and performing arts is to state the obvious. But the fundamental culture of this city, which has sustained it in good times and bad, is a culture of hope. It is a hope that, in the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "A day will come when we will harness for God the energies of love, and on that day, for the second time in history, man will have discovered fire."

My hope is that our individual efforts and the efforts of institutions such as the Jewish Foundation will help kindle that fire. And that, in time, that fire will become a blaze seen around the world.

And just as the Geneva Convention outlined the rules of war, there will be a Winnipeg Convention, establishing the rules for peace and social justice. And that Winnipeg will be the new Geneva.

View the speech online at <http://www.jewishfoundation.org/35thAnnualLuncheon-Dr.ArthurV.MauroSpeech.html>

Dr. Arthur V. Mauro

In September 2001, Dr. Arthur V. Mauro, O.C., O.M., Q.C., donated one million dollars to St. Paul's College at the University of Manitoba to establish the Arthur V. Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice. Dr. Mauro is an alumnus of St. Paul's College and the University of Manitoba. He served as Chancellor of the University of Manitoba from 1991 through 2000, and will serve as Chancellor of Lakehead University starting on January 1, 2010. He is an officer of the Order of Canada and a member of the Order of Manitoba. He is a former CEO of Investors Group, and is currently the Chair of the Winnipeg Airport Authority Board of Directors.