

NOTES FROM CANADA'S

YOUNG

ACTIVISTS

**A GENERATION
STANDS UP FOR CHANGE**

compiled and edited by

Severn Cullis-Suzuki · Kris Frederickson

Ahmed Kayssi · Cynthia Mackenzie

with **Daniel Aldana Cohen**

Foreword by **SAMANTHA NUTT**

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FOREWORD

Dr. Samantha Nutt



ARE ACTIVISTS BORN, or do they evolve out of life's inevitable twists and turns?

I was around fourteen years old when I realized that I was that reliably irritating person in the classroom who wouldn't take no for an answer—the one who could always be suckered by her peers into regaling the teacher with a never-ending chorus of “But it's not right!” and “That's not fair!” In what I can only assume was an attempt at retribution, an early English teacher of mine helped the class understand the idiom “having a bee in one's bonnet” by using me as the reference point. My uncompromising nature, in those early years, led to a lot of time spent in detention.

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It's little wonder, then, that I ended up finding my life's work in war zones—the reality of the injustice, the suffering, and the degradation afflicting those living with war around

the world *isn't* right, and it *isn't* fair. It was through witnessing, first hand, the horror of war (while I could still confidently check the “youth” demographic box) that I came to understand the importance of having a voice in something more meaningful than an onerous homework assignment and to discover the paradoxical sadness and joy that inevitably come with a “calling.”

The following collection of stories—reflections from many of Canada's brightest young thinkers—is a testament to the potential that exists in each of us to make our voices heard and to make a difference on pressing social issues. Miali-Elise Coley reminds us that this country needs to learn from the Inuit and from their traditional way of life, which is rooted in a deep respect for the environment and for racial diversity. Ilona Dougherty, founder of Apathy is Boring, continues to develop new and creative ways to combat complacency and engage youth in politics. Ahmed Kayssi, whose family found their way to Canada from their home country of war-torn Iraq, teaches racial and religious tolerance—one person at a time. Severn Cullis-Suzuki offers a beautiful tribute to the balance and bounty that exist within nature and upon which humankind depends. These and the other stories featured in *Notes from Canada's Young Activists* give us a first-hand look at those who are prepared to put it all on the line for a cause and how they arrived at this decision so early in life. Collectively, they offer something rarely captured so effectively in print: genuine hope. At a time when war, violence, cultural assimilation, natural disasters, and climate change emerge as problems that appear so overwhelming that they become paralytic, it is liberating to read about those who are championing a new ethos. It is impossible for anyone reading this book to walk away lamenting that it's too difficult to know where to start or what

to do. All of these young activists have websites. Send them an email, make a donation, join in their efforts. Don't wait!

Over my years as Executive Director of War Child Canada, I have met and spoken with many interesting people across Canada as part of our effort to inform public thinking about what it means to be a good global citizen. What has struck me is how much easier it is for most people to articulate what they are against rather than what they are for. This trait is, in many respects, part of the Canadian identity: we don't always know what we are,* but we know what we're not. The activists contributing to this book, by comparison, have made that leap—they know what they stand for, and they draw strength from an unrelenting belief in the positive role individuals and communities can play in effecting social change. Perhaps this self-assuredness, more than anything else, is what makes them extraordinary Canadians. This and the fact that they are also part of an elusive assortment of individuals who—for better or for worse—steadfastly refuse to give up at the first “no.”

More than two decades ago, in response to one of my earliest rants about something mundane in the middle of a computer science lab, the teacher (visibly irritated) shouted, “This

*For example, Canadians (including youth) have very sentimental views of our contribution to peacekeeping efforts around the world. A War Child Canada national youth opinion poll carried out in partnership with the polling firm Environics in 2005 found that young Canadians ranked peacekeeping as Canada's most positive contribution to the world, followed by foreign aid (the results are accurate within a margin of error of 4.3 percentage points). In reality, Canada is currently forty-fourth in the world in terms of our contribution to peacekeeping and fourteenth among industrialized nations in terms of our contribution to overseas development assistance as a percentage of our gross national income (GNI), outranked by Norway, Sweden, Germany, Britain, and a host of others. The target of a foreign-aid contribution of 0.7 per cent of the GNI, accepted by the United Nations in 1969, was put forward by our very own Lester B. Pearson.

is high school. It is not a democracy! When I want you to have an opinion, I'll give it to you!" He wanted me to sit down and shut up, and his frustration, in view of the context, was arguably justified. But his attitude also speaks to the systematic way in which the thoughts, ideas, and contributions of youth are so frequently marginalized in society. Young people, in Canada and around the world, deserve to be listened to and to be engaged in meaningful ways in the political processes that shape and determine their lives. This world is on loan to us from our children, and from our children's children. *Notes from Canada's Young Activists* offers many powerful reasons to invest in those exceptional young people who not only promise to be the leaders of tomorrow but who are also, without question, the leaders of today. We have so much to learn from them, and it will be exciting to see where they go next. I know I, for one, will be watching and waiting with anticipation.

Samantha Nutt ("Sam") is a medical doctor and the Executive Director of War Child Canada, which she co-founded at the age of twenty-nine. War Child Canada is a registered charity that works in war-torn communities around the world, providing support to thousands of children and their families. Sam was chosen by Maclean's magazine for their annual Honour Roll (celebrating twelve Canadians "making a difference"), was named one of Canada's Top 40 Under 40, and was profiled by Flare magazine as one of thirty "most outstanding Canadian women." She has been featured by Time magazine as one of Canada's five leading activists and, in 2006, was chosen by Chatelaine readers as one of twelve Canadian women they would most like to see run for politics. She lives with her husband and two-year-old son in Toronto. She writes frequently and speaks publicly on the global impact of war. For more information visit www.warchild.ca.

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INTRODUCTION

*Severn Cullis-Suzuki,
Kris Frederickson,
Ahmed Kayssi, and
Cynthia Mackenzie*

WE'RE CALLED MEMBERS of Generation Y, the MTV Generation, the Twixter or Boomerang Generation. We grew up with access to the world: through TV, travel, toys made on the other side of the globe, the Internet. And although we could watch wars as they happened around the world on the news, in Canada we grew up in a time of peace and a lot of prosperity. We can't imagine a time of economic depression, world wars, or legal racial segregation.

But with the fruits of globalization came an unease. We became expert consumers before we even got to school; we were programmed by TV to *want* at an early age. We learned about the hole in the ozone, then AIDS, then climate change. | 1
While we learned that democracy was a Western gift to the world, we also learned to despise our own politicians. And now, though we live in one of the wealthiest nations in the

world, a collective anxiety manifests itself in stress, depression, ADD, loneliness, obesity, anorexia, and apathy. We have unprecedented access to media of all forms, but the doomsday messages they feed us are more than enough to make us put our blinders on, make us cynical or hopeless, or just turn us into hipsters.

But we are adapting—and evolving. Many among our generation have found a way to navigate the overwhelming deluge of information and use their tools to shift the status quo: Lyndsay Poaps, a pink-haired youth activist who ran for city office; Tim Harvey, who rowed across the Bering Sea to draw attention to our addiction to fossil fuel; Annahid Dashtgard, who decided to help her peers deal with their eating disorders; and Shakil Choudhury, who tackled his discomfort with his own heritage to promote racial tolerance. Someone forgot to tell them there was nothing they could do.

They are some of the inspiring young people whose personal stories moved the four of us and made us think about our own roles in the world. We, the editors of this collection, met through the Action Canada program, a fellowship with the idealist mandate of “building leadership for Canada’s future.” Thrown together, we began digging deeper beyond *what* we did to discover the motivations behind our work and our action: Why was Kris passionate about water and Aboriginal issues? Why was Cynthia dedicated to social equity and understanding policy and politics? Why was Severn passionate about the relationship between culture and ecology? Why was Ahmed driven towards politics and civic involvement (and why did he call himself KC)? It was our stories—not our CVs—that communicated who we really were.

Soon we were talking about people we knew with similar aims who were pushing for social change in a spectrum

of ways—from the performance arts to politics to business. George Roter used his engineering training and gregarious personality to start Engineers Without Borders. Ilona Dougherty harnessed her social skills to bring rock stars, politicians, and young voters together. Miali-Elise Coley travelled the world to fight for her traditional way of life in the Arctic. We suddenly realized there was a vast network of young people who were building a nation they believe in and who, in changing their lives, are changing our worlds. These people apparently ignored the myths we are commonly taught: that we must choose between making a living and making a difference, between being respected and being effective, between pursuing a personal career and building a strong community. Instead, they were doing all of the above. It was surprising, and it was totally uplifting.

That conversation was the seed of this group of stories. We asked Daniel Aldana Cohen, a young writer who believes in the power of language to effect political change, to come on board and help us tell our tales.

In the midnight sun of the Yukon at our last Action Canada meeting, a social worker told us, “You can change someone’s mind, but they can change it again. Change someone’s heart, and that is forever.” When we listen to Devi Mucina’s stories of being a kid sleeping in a wastepaper bin in the midst of chaos in Harare, suddenly the issues of civil war in Africa are real. When we imagine what it was like for KC to vote as an Iraqi-Canadian, a country that hadn’t held elections in fifty years, the concept of democracy takes on a different meaning. When we read how Anil Patel’s life was changed with an accident that immobilized him for five months at thirteen, we can recognize the urgency of figuring out what is really important. Stories are the way that our hearts connect information to

human meaning. Storytelling is our oldest form of communicating, and amid the drone of sound bites and media clips, it is still the most effective.

So here are stories of a world we can believe in. These people have shared with us their turning points, when something clicked inside that shifted how they recognized their responsibility in the world. Why did they act? Their stories are the explanation. Their catalysts for acting are all different. Their backgrounds are different. Their perspectives on the country are different. And so emerges one of the main messages of our book: *diversity* is the key to human survival and sustainability; no one “silver bullet” exists—solutions to our problems are many.

Some of these young activists, like Craig Kielburger, who founded Free The Children to end child labour, have devoted their energy to starting organizations that fight for social equity; others, like Jessica Lax and Natalie Gerum, are using the habits and attitudes of their daily lives to make fundamental shifts in social norms. Some, like Yuill Herbert, are using their voices to challenge governments to make important policy changes; others, like Ginger Gosnell-Myers, run for political positions and try to change government from within. Robin Rix and Chris Richards lent their efforts to work abroad; Richard Hoshino and Simon Jackson found their work at home in Canada.

Although their stories are diverse, they share themes of a sustainable, secure, and just future. They all reject the idea that nothing needs to be done and that nothing can be done. Their endeavours are rooted in idealism, but their actions show that their solutions are practical and achievable by all. They prove it's not naive to stand up for something—in fact, doing so has opened doors for them beyond anything they'd expected. Their success dares us to follow our dreams for the world.

They have struggled too—depression, guilt, and burn-out are a few of the afflictions along the path that follows the heart. Their journeys were as much about questioning their own identities as about shifting society. They have shared some of the personal challenges that accompanied their push against the norm.

In an age of unprecedented access to travel, several contributors had epiphanies on the other side of the planet that taught them to appreciate the ground beneath their feet. Cross-border organizations like Karen Kun's Waterlution and Ben Peterson's Journalists for Human Rights, and creative activism like d'bi. young's dub poetry, reflect a globalized reality that is normal to us. The contributors in this volume show us that when we stitch our global and local identities together, we can find the sustainable social and environmental solutions that seem so elusive.

As you absorb these stories, maybe you'll feel as we did reading them that anything is possible. We have designed the book so that it doesn't matter where you begin: peruse the stories in order, pick out the ones that catch your attention, or start reading simply where the pages fall open. How you choose to let the narrative affect you is the interesting part. If somewhere in this little pile of words you are moved by someone's action, hang on to that feeling—because you too are part of a web of Canadians and global citizens whose actions are changing the world. What kind of change that is, however, is entirely up to you.