

Mar 8/72

SOME THOUGHTS ON GOVERNMENT FUNDING PROGRAMS, REFORMIST COMMUNITY GROUPS AND RADICAL POLITICS

by Lanny Beckman

I want to consider, among other things, the function of government funding programs for small, independent community groups. For more than a year, I have been very involved in the Mental Patients Association, a particularly successful example of a community group. I have spent a large amount of time pursuing government funding for MPA. Of the \$70,000 we have received in our first year, ~~we~~ the very large majority has come from government, particularly the federal government (CYC - \$14,000; OFY - \$5,000 last year and expecting \$27,000 this year; - LIP - \$36,000). I strongly believe that the success of MPA (a group of extremely oppressed and hitherto totally disorganized people) is crucial. My views on government funding are shaped largely by my commitment to MPA. They are also shaped by my socialist conviction that revolutionary change is necessary in Canada.

Let me make that the first of a list of axioms:

1) To solve social, economic and political problems, revolutionary changes in the structure of Canadian society are required.

2) Canada is not in a revolutionary state, nor even in a pre-revolutionary state. At present, the radical left is small in numbers and fragmented in composition. There is simply no organized base for ~~an~~ imminent revolution.

3) Radical organizing around general political issues such as nationalism, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism has not been particularly successful in laying the foundation for political opposition to the ruling class. While political groups have raised the level of consciousness during the past 5-10 years, no effective mass-based party has emerged or is likely to in the near future.

4) General political propagandizing, which originated in universities in the early 60s, seems to have reached a point of diminishing returns. While this sort of political activity is important, it has proven too abstract and impersonal to command the allegiance of large numbers of people.

5) Probably the most promising and successful developments over the past 5 years have been in the growth of progressive, reformist, "single-issue" community groups. ~~ix~~

It is possible for groups like MPA to organize on the basis of collective participation in decision-making and to serve very real needs of oppressed people. Other groups include welfare groups, tenants groups, women's lib, gay lib, native groups etc. I believe there is a high probability that the eventual coalition

of such people's groups can provide an important political base; further, that this base will be composed of people who have had actual experience in organizing, in working with other oppressed people vis-a-vis real needs and in dealing with established structures.

I'm not claiming that reformist, community organizing ought to replace explicitly radical organizing (the two have to evolve together), but I believe that, of the two, reformist organizing represents the more realistic ~~an~~ alternative at this time for building a potential movement.

Obviously, the government has different views. It believes that funding community groups will, in the long run, either produce no significant changes or, in the short run, will involve potential radicals in harmless, reformist activity and may even put band-aids on a few social problems. In any case, the government views the issue of community organizing and of providing funds as basically unimportant.

The amount of money invested in programs like CYC, OFY and LIP is trivially small. Of the one billion dollars spent on the Winter Works program, only 50 to 100 million went to community groups. "Community development" programs are given crumbs. I think the government's main motive in funding these programs is PR, is in providing a showcase by creating a small number of jobs while the image created is that problems of unemployment, youth "unrest" etc. are being recognized and dealt with. Obviously, they are not.

Another characteristic of these programs is that they offer jobs, not to poor, working class or underclass people, but rather to unemployed, middle class university background young people. It may be the case (and this is probably an element--albeit a minor one-- in the government's motives) that these jobs will block the radicalization of middle class kids. But on the whole I doubt this is the case. The movement was begun by privileged young people in universities. The bulk of radical initiative is still taken on by this sort of person. However, a major problem in their political growth has been the isolation and ivory tower quality of university politics. The generation of rhetoric about class oppression, poverty etc. has occurred in a vacuum. The hives of university radicals and working class poor almost never meet, just as the student movement and the labour movement have never formed any viable coalition.

It has always been true of revolutionary situations that the political leadership sprang from middle class intellectuals. However, during the 60s, the gulf between these people and ordinary working class people remained enormous by virtue of the isolation of radicals at universities. During the past few years, university radicals have--with or without government funding--begun to move out of the university and into (what is wrongly called) the community. I see this move as essential.

I don't want to exaggerate the number of politically conscious radicals who are working in government funded community groups. The number is small here as everywhere. I also don't ~~want~~ want to imply that very many funded groups are imminently political or even that they serve the needs of oppressed people. Certainly the majority of OFY and LIP projects are liberal in the worst sense, serve only the irrelevant needs of the middle class and may even retard political development.

But, to state the obvious: we do not control government decisions and cannot have anything but an insignificantly small effect on its policies at this point. We find ourselves in the position of having available to us some government money for community organizing. Our question is whether we can use it (in contrast to their goals) for politically relevant work. In the absence of any other clear political alternative, I believe we can and should get our hands on as much of that money as possible to build the few organizations that hold some political promise.

I feel it is the function of radicals working in reformist groups to join together with oppressed people to serve real social and personal needs, to make it clear to the people that our commitment to the work is based on socialist principles and to educate people toward socialism based on tangible, common working bonds and goals. You begin with the facts that the people you're working with are not originally socialists, that they have been exposed to radical rhetoric (distorted in the establishment press) and that they have not responded to it. To move together toward radical consciousness and change requires a working base. For most groups that means a location (which costs money), it means a program that people relate to out of real needs, not out of abstract commitment, it means time is needed to develop communal feeling based on common relevant experiences. Unless the small number of radicals in any given region join together on a single or small number of community projects, no project will have sufficient human resources to accomplish any of the goals listed above. The fact is that radicals are scattered and non-radicals are not committed to collective work without salaries. However, many good though non-political people will work hard in collective projects for subsistence salaries (and will in fact kickback a portion of their salaries to the group). OFY, LIP etc provide these salaries. I believe that the potential political progress of real groups outweighs the negative effects of the many irrelevant projects funded by government.

I believe the cohesion and collective consciousness developed in groups like MPA offer people the first insight into the fact that oppressed people can band together to make real changes in their lives. I know that the termination of funds to MPA (which I believe will eventually occur) will create a large number of angry people who will remain together to wage a political battle. These are people who were angry before, but who had no clear focus for their anger, people who saw no possibility of collective action to change their lives and society. MPA has given people insight into that possibility.

capitalism
Canadian ~~society~~ cannot solve its own problems. Programs like LIP are mildly desparate attempts to polish the surface of the problems. Regardless of government policy, opposition will continue to grow. The question here for political people is whether LIP type programs will accelerate or impede this opposition. As I've stated, I believe the former to be the case.

Given the present economic situation--which is still far from depression level--I do not see other political alternatives growing more quickly, nor do I see their being retarded by LIP programs. I feel progressive organizing must occur wherever possible. Reformistx groups offer that possibility. In spite of itself, LIP and OFY are kindling that possibility in a small number of projects. From my point of view, radicals (who do not have the power to abolish LIP) ought to engage in liberating as much of that money as possible for progressive groups.

In fact, LIP and OFY recognize the potential political danger of their policies. They correct for this by building ~~in~~ maximum insecurity into the groups they fund. The great majority of funds are allotted to salaries, meaning that no groups (if it uses the money as stated in the application) can ever build a viable economic base to insure the continuation of the group. These programs make sure (or try to) that all funds are spent as soon as they are issued. The treasury of any group stays always close to zero. No capital base can be laid.

I Insecurity is also built in by providing funds for short periods of time (LIP * 6 mos, OFY - 4 months, CYC which used to sign 2 year contracts, now will only sign contracts for one year at a time.) The programs are designed to generate a large number of small, weak and transitory groups. If a group manages to achieve any measure of size and strength, funding will be terminated (as MPA has been told by OFY that we won't receive funds for '73, the reason being that we're too established). The government's goal is to make sure that funding is cut off before a group becomes politically threatening; the group's goal is to make sure that it is threatening by the time its funds are cut off.

It is important to press for a) longer term funding;
b) a greater proportion of funds be allotted to non-salary expenses and c) fewer restrictions on the use of funds, ie., treasuries should be able to built up, capital expenditures ought to be permitted etc. I don't imagine the government will respond too positive y to these demands, however, they're more likely to acquiesce here than to proposals of abolishing community funding programs.

While the money is available, it should be used to build community groups. The government will retain its policy of funding only small, short term projects (except for backward established agencies like the YMCA). Political hope arises from the possibility that these small groups will begin to merge into a people's collective of groups. Otherwise community groups will remain fragmented and powerless as have explicitly radical groups.

I believe that money for real groups will be cut off when they become a potential threat to established interests. The objectives of these groups ought to be to develop a collective base so that when funds are terminated, the group(s) will not disintegrate, but will constitute a viable organizational base for further political action.