

ASK THE ANCESTORS

The election of Donald Trump in November 2025 shocked people across Canada and the world. Americans chose him as their 47th president and rewarded Republicans with effective control over all levels of the federal government. Analysis of the Democratic defeat and the role of culture wars and billionaires will fill media platforms for months to come, but it comes down to this: faced with a choice of someone who represents the status quo and a system that many feel is letting them down, or a life-long scrapper who promises to shake up that system, a clear majority voted for change.

The entire world is watching as things unfold. Mass deportations, tax cuts for the wealthiest people on the planet, slashing environmental standards and public services, Ukraine's independence, the Middle East condemned to relentless violence, and so much more...

As we learned immediately, the consequences for Canada are deeply troubling. While Trump threatens massive tariffs and speaks of the 51st state, influential figures in corporate Canada feel emboldened to dismantle any previous consensus on climate action, social programs or human rights for refugees, all while demanding increased military spending and integration with the U.S. economy. The "Premier of Petroleum," Danielle Smith, took her show to the U.S. to deliberately sabotage any sense of Canadian unity in the face of Trump's aggression.

Conservative politicians are awash with funds from Bay Street financiers, mining magnates, land speculators and Alberta oil barons. Pierre Poilievre was taking the right-wing playbook written by

Steve Bannon for Trump and riding a wave of discontent towards certain victory. And then Donald Trump swept to power, and, as Naomi Klein noted in the title of one of her books, This Changes Everything.

What does this moment mean for the rest of us? People want answers they believe will make a difference in their lives. For those who are despairing or feeling hopeless, an answer can be found by using our heart to inform our hands. In Steven Spielberg's movie *Amistad*, the most powerful words came from the leader of the enslaved Africans who rose up to take the ship from their captors. The American lawyer who was at the Supreme Court arguing for their freedom faced certain defeat in his legal case. He asked his clients for advice and received eternal wisdom: "we ask our ancestors."

We too can look back on our own history and "ask the ancestors."



Ruth Lor and Bromley Armstrong went to Dresden in 1954 as part of the Toronto Joint Labour Committee on Human Rights campaign to challenge systemic racism

Not simply the fathers of Confederation, but people like Louis-Joseph Papineau, Louis Riel, T. Buck Suzuki, Agnes McPhail, Bromley Armstrong, Ruth Lor, Viola Desmond, Gerry Gallagher, Charan Gill, Art Manuel, Carol Wall, and Murray Sinclair. Not all these names are well known, but they deserve to be. How did these heroes and so many others harness the energy and spirit to succeed against overwhelming odds? How did they project a vision of a more just society while building the power necessary to challenge the economic and political elites of the day?

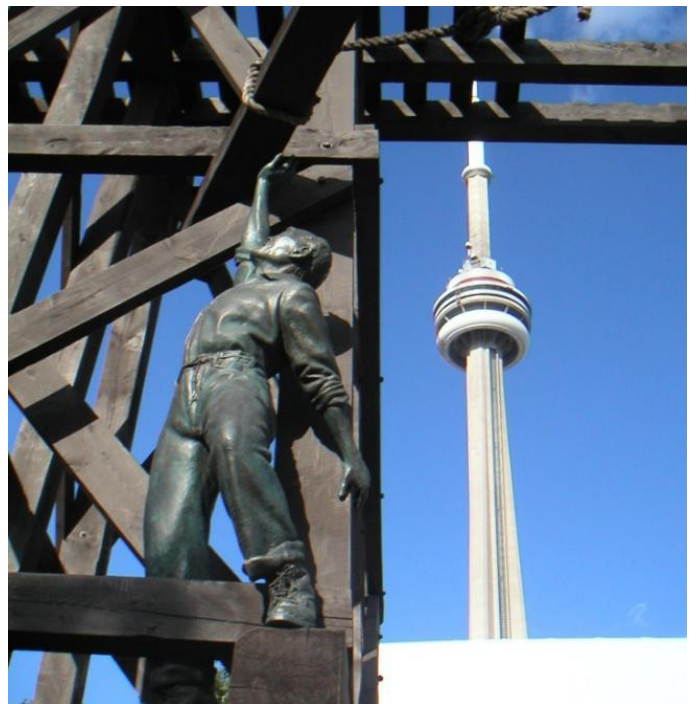
I was blessed by learning at the feet of incredible leaders of the working-class movement, most of whom were never profiled in the history books. They were natural leaders who were thrown into struggle by the events of their day and helped forge mass movements—for racial justice, affordable housing, environmental action, women's equality, gay rights, and for respect at work and in society. I heard women who had sustained a peace movement through the cold war expressing their joy at a 1970s rally that “the young people are joining us to carry on the message of peace.” I marched beside Cesar Chavez and Marshall Ganz in their effort to win dignity and a union for California farm workers. I will never forget the humble dignity of that movement that could force the most powerful opponents to yield.



Pura Velasco receives Bromley Armstrong Award for her work on caregivers' rights

I saw the same sense of purpose in the disarming smile of Pura Velasco as she led the fight for migrant domestic workers. I think of Italian and Portuguese immigrants fighting the Compensation Board to win benefits for their injured bodies.

Of the brave African-Canadian leaders like Daniel Hill and Bromley Armstrong who fought tenaciously to dismantle systemic racism before that was a phrase in our vocabulary. Of Cape Breton miners, or Winnipeg strikers, tenants fighting for rent controls and affordable housing, of young South Asians who organized to resist physical violence by racist thugs, and women from every background struggling against endemic sexual harassment or domestic violence.



There is a monument in Toronto to the 14,000 Chinese Railroad workers who came from Guangdong in the 1880s to blast through the Rockies and complete the Canadian Pacific Railway. Hundreds died at work and many more were injured. A century later, their descendants and community allies forced the government to apologize for the

infamous Head Tax and the *Chinese Exclusion Act* that followed.

The Japanese Canadian community sought reparations for the savage internment program of the Second World War and decided that the money should be used to create the Canadian Race Relations Foundation—to help educate young Canadians about the impact of xenophobia and bigotry.

There are many lessons from intense struggles for justice, but there is also much to be learned from other kinds of community building that is also necessary for a caring and inclusive society. Those who volunteer for charitable causes are also essential for the social solidarity we need. From the United Way to newcomer settlement agencies, to seniors' services and mental health networks. The people in churches, mosques and synagogues who offer shelter to those in distress, and the countless others who sponsor refugees fleeing famine and war.

There is a beautiful statue in Toronto's Regent Park of Pam McConnell, a community activist who used her role at city council to spur a massive investment in decent housing and urban renewal. Arms outstretched, she invites us to "look at all we have done." Not just the physical space of fine buildings and community amenities, but the tapestry of people from diverse origins and backgrounds who have come together to create a better future.



If only we made sure that, as working-class Canadians, our stories and achievements are being chronicled and shared.

But here is the reality. ***"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and never will."***

Those words of African American abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass in his visits to Canada in the 1840s are as true today as they were at that time. How do we build power today in the time of global corporate empires, billionaire funders of fascism, and a wave of disinformation that dominates every screen? If we ask our ancestors, what do they tell us?

Marshall Ganz, the fellow I met through the Scarborough grape boycott committee 50 years ago, has become one of the foremost social justice educators in the world. He recently published a summary of his life's work entitled *People Power Change*. It describes using the power of narrative to help ordinary people discover their own inner strength and build deep relationships with others. His "five practices of democracy" are: building relationships, storytelling, strategizing, acting and structuring. It's not about finding "kumbaya" moments, it's about intentional relationships that become the basis of organization and mobilization.

Ganz provides a unique but powerful definition: "Leadership is the ability to allow others to act in common purpose in a time of uncertainty." It's quite a different approach to the strong man politics that is sweeping our world today, or the strong leader culture that informs many of our movements. But it is what we will rely on to get us through the dark days ahead. There is another aspect of his craft. He often reminds the reader that every faith tradition is rooted in the questions of how we discover and affirm our common humanity. It is done through storytelling that paints a picture of a people committed to each other. Someone once referred to that as "the vision thing." It is what holds people together in times of distress, of endurance and when asked to take risks.



Toronto union members training with Marshall Ganz

The California farm workers told a story rooted in the traditions of Mexican culture, Catholicism, the Mexican revolution and everyday life of people in the fields. At the same time, we in Canada were grappling with our relations with the United States, our sovereignty (either in Canada or Quebec, or for Indigenous Peoples) and resistance to being drawn even closer into the American empire. A wave of nationalism sparked the move for a clearer Canadian identity, arts and culture, and a reckoning with the dynamics of a branch-plant economy. The Council of Canadians became the standard-bearer for the widespread yearning for an independent Canada.

If progressive Canadians are clear about what we stand for today, we all have a much better chance of defending what we have won in the past. And in the face of the adversity to come,

our commitment to building a stronger future together must be seen and believed by Canadians from all walks of life, in every part of this country. But there is something missing today. We don't have a coherent progressive movement. We have lots of good organizations doing good work on their individual issues. Lots of volunteers—from the youth of the Fridays for Future and Black Lives Matter to the veterans of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations and Seniors for Climate Action.

Compared to the ascendant conservative movement, whose inspiration comes from the Tea Party and whose energy was sparked by the Freedom Convoy, the progressive movement has no shared “playbook” in the way that Steve Bannon created for Donald Trump, and leading conservative operatives translated into Canadian. Ontario Proud was funded by the development industry furious with the Liberals for the Greenbelt policies. Together, they helped create a momentum that wiped out the “natural governing party” of Canada's largest province. In British Columbia, John Rustad's Conservatives came within a hair's breadth of taking office—with a party that had barely existed a few years before.

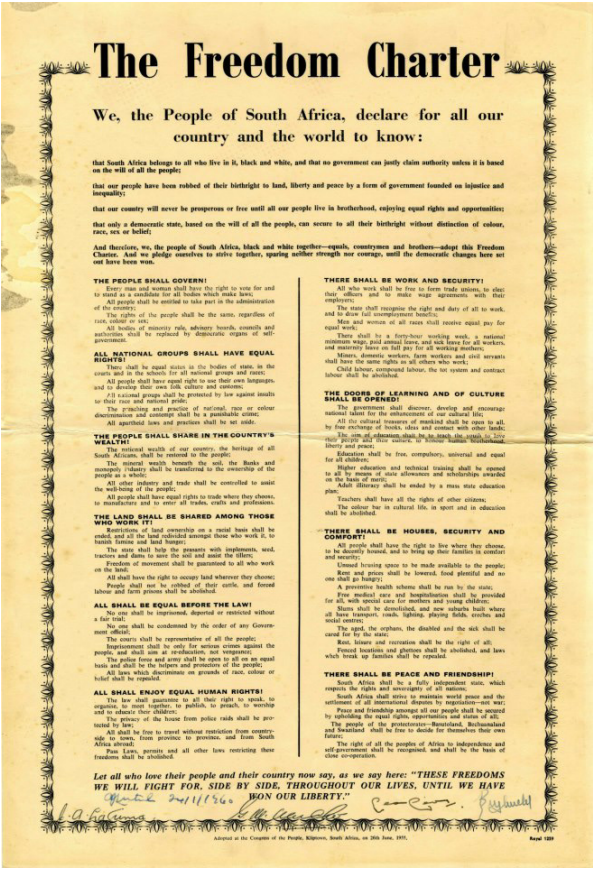
These guys have a playbook, and we don't. Sure, some folks want to aspire to “strategic voting” as a solution. But that lasts about as long as the first debate between party leaders as each seeks to find advantage in the other's weakness. And frankly, the Liberal Party in both Ontario and Canada are scurrying back to the centre to try to repair their relations with Bay Street and the Rideau elites. The NDP are unlikely to form a government east of the Manitoba border without a mass movement to propel them there. And there is no mass movement today that is building power for the 99 per cent.

I always smiled at a cheeky poster that my Guyanese friends brought from back home

to explain this issue in the clearest terms:
“Mobilization without Organization is like bark without bite!”

So, my friends, how does our side do
Organization?

Think back to another group of ancestors, across the ocean. Nelson Mandela, Moses Kotane, Soe Slovo and Ruth First, Desmond Tutu. How did they and millions of South Africans sustain a struggle over decades against the ruthless apartheid state backed by the wealth and weapons of the UK, the US. .and Israel? They built unity by creating the Freedom Charter that could serve as a common vision for many disparate groups and then coordinated mass actions through a network of inspiring leaders.



In his 1999 book *Developing Organizational Capacity*, Alan Kaplan drew the lessons of this long journey.

His approach was summarized by Rob Fairley for the Toronto & York Region Labour Council as it sought to build its own capacity at the start of this century. There are two aspects outlined:

An organization with capacity

- Is an autonomous, self-aware entity that defines its own sources of inspiration, focus and direction.
- Is able to learn from its experience.
- Is able to respond with flexibility, innovation and adaptability to changing circumstances.
- Has a strategic outlook that enables it to act decisively to impact and change its circumstances and social context.
- Motivates, inspires and develops its members.
- Concentrates on developing a robust capability.
- Is sustainable—organized for the long haul, rather than for the capacity to perform a particular task at a specific time.

The following steps, in sequence, build an organization with capacity

- As we create a *shared assessment*, a shared conceptual framework of the organization’s situation in the world.



- Develop an organizational “attitude” (stance) and identity (sense of itself) which enables the organization to act confidently and effectively on the world.
- Create a vision, an understanding of what the organization intends to do, by exploring internal and external constraints and possibilities.
- Develop a strategy—the “how” by which the organization intends to realize its vision.
- Nurture an organizational culture with norms and values which are self-critical and self-reflective.
- Structure the organization to suit its culture, implement its strategy and achieve its goals.
- Take the time to develop the organization’s members and organizers—it is not enough to train them.
- When the organization faces a scarcity of material resources, harness organizational ‘attitude’ to overcome the scarcity.

Kaplan speaks of how to build a single organization, but surely the same concepts can apply to the entire progressive movement.

It’s time for us to get our act together and start building the kind of power that once forced capital to accede to demands in the past: public health care, public pensions, unemployment insurance and social benefits, non-market social housing, pay equity, women’s and queer rights. The list is truly impressive when you count all that previous generations of Canadians have won through political bargaining—and add on a national pharmacare program secured in the last year.

They made tough decisions to build solidarity that was never easy. I would say that, in 2025, we are all called to replicate their determination and vision.

In the words of one of those ancestors, we should *dream no small dreams*—and then commit to each other to model the spirit of Marge Piercy’s immortal poem:

To Be of Use

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,

Who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,

Who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,

Who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge in the task,

Who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along,

Who stand in the line and haul in their places,

Who are not parlor generals and field deserters

but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

Marge Piercy

Authored by John Cartwright