

March 14, 2012 – We Canada

Dr. Colin Soskolne is Professor of Epidemiology in the University of Alberta's School of Public Health. He is an accomplished researcher, teacher, writer, speaker and consultant. Colin will be speaking at the March 14th We Canada tour date, at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Colin was kind enough to answer some questions, and to give some hints at what he will be discussing in March. Colin's passion for environmental sustainability and his long-standing involvement with the Earth Charter make him the perfect fit to be a key speaker on the tour. And, if you have a chance to hear him speak, you will come away ready to take on any challenges. No plug (lead) can do his experience and knowledge justice; so, let's get to it:

- **What is the Earth Charter and how is it relevant today?**

The Earth Charter is accessible on the Internet in some 50 languages, and provides a universal set of values and ethical principles by which each of us could choose to live. If we individually endorsed the Earth Charter, and if we then encouraged businesses, corporations, institutions, and all levels of government to also endorse and subscribe to the Earth Charter, then, at once, we would start moving onto a sustainable path; this is a path towards a world of sustainable peace, justice and democracy. Such a world would ensure a life for generations to come. Not subscribing to the Earth Charter commits us to a very harsh and desolate future.

The Earth Charter was developed following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and was formally launched in 2000 by the Earth Charter Initiative, which has its headquarters at the United Nations University for Peace in Costa Rica. It was created as a grass roots initiative embracing traditionally marginalized cultures and religions in its development.

The Earth Charter was never — and has yet to be — endorsed by the United Nations. However, it was adopted by numerous organizations, networks and local and national governments and it was very present at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio+10, in Johannesburg in 2002. In many parts of the world, organizations have formed to further the adoption and implementation of the Earth Charter and its principles. In Canada, this effort has a long way to go.

- **What can civil society and/or governments do to support the integration of Earth Charter values and principles into everyday activities?**

First, civil society needs to familiarize itself with the systemic vision, values and principles embodied in the Earth Charter. Governments ought to be encouraging this. Next, governments need to endorse and implement decision-making consistent with the values and principles of the Earth Charter. All actions need to be aligned with Earth Charter goals, consistent with its values and principles.

Recognizing that the Earth Charter is a soft-law instrument (being akin to a declaration or an accord), finding ways to incorporate its values and principles into hard law must be the goal. Indeed, many countries already have amended their constitutions to incorporate aspects embodied in the Earth Charter, like future generational rights to a sustainable environment.

- How would you define success at the Earth Summit 2012? And, are there any lessons from the Earth Charter process that can be incorporated into holding a successful Earth Summit 2012?

A re-commitment by the E-NGOs to the Earth Charter would constitute a minimum level of success. The ultimate would be that government leaders decide to agree on a shared vision of sustainability as the Earth Charter articulates, and identify a plan for working towards the adoption into law of the values and principles embodied in the Earth Charter. An evaluation of the Earth Charter's current reach would be important to know.

- What kind of achievements are you hoping the Earth Summit 2012 will achieve, that previous summits did not (i.e., 1992, 2002)?

Have governments and non-state actors indeed inspired and committed to join forces following a common ethical framework such as the Earth Charter. Moving the Earth Charter from being adopted by only E-NGOs in 2002 to its adoption by as many governmental organizations at the municipal, city, provincial, state and country levels.

- What role should Canada play at the Earth Summit 2012?

Canada should not act to obstruct the uptake of the Earth Charter. Unfortunately, its actions under the current government of the past some 8 years, especially in recent Kyoto meetings, do not bode well for a positive role for the Earth Charter's uptake at Rio+20. The Canadian delegation's role should be to see the values and principles of the Earth Charter as being worthy of adoption in solidarity with global concerns for the sustainability of life on Earth. Credible indicators point to declines in all that sustains life. By adopting Earth Charter values and principles, a life for future generations would be more secure. To achieve this, government policy will need to realign its position in support of life rather than in support of short-term profits and relations with powerful vested interests.

- What kind of message is Canada sending to the rest of the world (with its stance on the environment and sustainability)?

A position of arrogance and non-solidarity is the essence of the message that Canada is practicing on matters of global environmental sustainability. Self-interest appears to be driving Canadian policy. Humility in the face of calamitous predictions would be more consistent with the Earth Charter's goals. By adopting the Earth Charter, other concerns,

such as those from the Occupy movement, would also be addressed.

- **What will it cost Canadians if we do not become involved in global sustainable development efforts?**

It will cost Canada the further erosion of its international reputation and respect; a lost opportunity to be seen as a global leader on environmental and sustainability issues (and other matters); and the loss of more than just seats at the UN Security Council. It will cost Canada in terms of remediation, locally and globally, and in economic terms by not being ahead of the curve when it comes to transitioning to a sustainable economy that relies on renewable resources.

Epidemiologists are trained to protect the public's health by identifying interventions to lessen the burden of harms to communities locally and globally; harms include premature deaths and preventable illnesses. Historically, environmental harms that have been minimized were achieved by preventing illness and death through safer air, water and soils. Today, however, with the scale and reach of the global changes that are underway, including questions of access to water, clean air and food security issues, it now behooves those in public health to point the way forward for preventing calamitous declines in human and other life-forms, as well as the collapse of civilization as disparities and polarizations become all the more ingrained.

- **How realistic is it for Canada to pursue sustainable alternative measurements of well-being (outside of GDP)?**

It is a matter of political will. Visionary policies that inspire hope are most likely to be enabling of the needed changes in the world. Instead of GDP, measures that rather take into account that which is important to people (like happiness and genuine progress, as opposed simply to "cash flows") will provide benchmarks against which societies can better evaluate their progress.

- **What do you think of other sustainable policy options like pricing carbon and supporting fair trade procurement?**

Any policy option that commits to a cap on carbon (and methane) in the very short term, as well as to reductions below 1990 levels is needed. By continuing on the present path of further adding to the dangerous accumulation of greenhouse gasses in the upper atmosphere, we are further committing both present and future generations to ever-expanding ranges in both the frequency and severity of extreme weather phenomena. Thus, the sooner limits to emissions are undertaken by whatever mechanism that ensures a fair distribution of both risks and benefits on regional, national and international levels, the better. The more we delay implementing any such policies, the greater the likelihood that catastrophic harms will continue and worsen.

- What role can/should civil society play at the Earth Summit 2012?

Work through existing E-NGOs and lend support to the Earth Charter Initiative globally. Arrange teach-ins, and identify mechanisms for returning from Brazil to your home country to expand interest in and commitment to the Earth Charter. Work to establish local chapters of the Earth Charter Initiative. Perhaps this could be achieved as a natural outflow from the We Canada movement.

Civil society needs to engage and motivate for greater integrity in governance, consistent with Earth Charter values and principles, at all levels and in all of our institutions, especially those that can be held to account. Setting a good example at the top will permeate through all of society; setting bad examples at the top likewise permeates all of society's behaviours. The Earth Charter provides for many good examples that people would embrace if the incentives were in place for them to do so.