**Tony Clarke: Speech to the First Annual Conference of the Action Canada Network**

28 April 1991

**Introduction:**

Tony Clarke's speech to the First Annual Conference of the Action Canada Network (Alberta) on April 28, 1991provides us with a "rare opportunity to reflect on recent developments in coalition building at the national level. In his insightful talk, which is reproduced in this chapter, Tony locates coalition-building in the present historical moment and looks ahead to the next few years as critical for building a people's movement in Canada. He examines three important themes: the politics of social movements, the politics of social protest, and the politics of social transformation. Tony looks to the development of a People' s Charter and an alternative agenda - and the need to take a stand at this critical juncture in Canadian history.

**TONY CLARKE:**

Introduction:

Well, sisters and brothers. this is the last leg in terms of the work you've done over the last few days ... On behalf of the Action Canada Network, the provincial coalitions across Canada and most of the 40 national organizations that are a part of the Action Canada Network at the national level, we bring you greetings from coast to coast for this incredibly important event that you're having here today ...

Challenging the Free Trade Agreement

Negotiations are about to begin with respect to continental free trade involving Mexico. We have been working very hard in the last 8 or 9 months to develop working relationships with popular movements and opposition political parties in Mexico and more recently in the United States. The only way we could begin to address the extension of this corporate agenda was to be able to reach out and feel solidarity with the movement and the people. They're affected by the same agenda in the same system. And that's something that has happened with remarkable speed. Just as we talk about fast track negotiations, we too are all put on a fast track schedule in order to be able to build working relationships, in this case, across very diverse cultural grounds.

One of the most remarkable things I found in these international meetings was the extent to which Canadians are being looked upon with a degree of seriousness that I've never seen before. The reason is twofold. The first is that we have just come through almost two and a half years experience of the U.S.-Canada free trade deal and we have a story to tell about devastation and destruction, about the situation of our country - in terms of what the economic and the social fallout has been, and what we're now seeing in terms of the cultural fallout of that free trade deal. When you tell that story, in the end you say: "we don't really know whether we're going to have the country that we have known, called Canada, at the end of this decade." It really strikes home to people. It's a story that people need to hear and now they're hearing it south of the border.

When I was involved in the period '87 and '88, going down to the States and trying to get some kind of interest built up around the Canada-U.S. free trade negotiations, at that time you got polite responses but you hardly got anybody really listening and paying any attention. Now when we go down, when we tell our stories, you have rooms packed full of people, you have media there. The story is now a priority as far as the Americans are concerned- because they're afraid of what the impacts will be regarding the other end of the deal. And that's a real breakthrough.

The second reason (Canadians are being listened to) is that people respect the degree to which we have been able to build a cross-country national network and coalition in this country. We have done this not only to fight against the negotiation and implementation of the free trade deal leading up to and through the 1988 election. But we have also stayed together to build a broader based coalition and a broader based campaign to continue the struggle against the corporate agenda, to build an alternative future for our country. When you tell that story, people want to know more about it. I've never heard Americans listen with more intent, I’ve never heard them ask more questions and show a greater interest in what is going on north of the 49th parallel- that we have something to offer in terms of the future of this continent.

Our Place in History  
These two aspects give us a certain impetus with respect to where we are historically at the present movement. We need to ask ourselves: "Who are we in the 1990s? Why have we come here? Why are we so concerned and interested in the issues that we are addressing? What is the calling that we have at this particular moment in history?" These are questions that we need to ask ourselves over and over again. Because it's only by grappling with these questions that we will understand why it is so important to take the next two or three years very seriously.

I suggest that we might also cast our thoughts back to another point in our own history as a country. The 1930s has some interesting parallels with the late '80s and early '90s. That was the period of the depression, as well as the period in which a world war was put together. But beyond that, it was a period in which people really saw some fundamental changes taking place in the economy and in the society in which they lived. People fought for a future and they fought against certain things that were happening. It was a time in which new social movements arose. There were social movements on the right and on the left, and they made an enormous contribution to the politics of the times. It was also a period in which new political parties emerged to challenge the old line parties, so that there was a way of looking at-politics in the country that was quite unlike any other previous period. I suggest to you that we are in a similar period right now. Not that I'm trying to say that history is repeating itself, but there are lessons to be learned from previous moments like that.

However, I believe there are two differences that we should note with respect to the 1990s versus the 1930s. The first is that the 1930s was characterized by a horrible depression, an economic depression that dragged people down. We are in a very serious economic recession that we may recover from, but that's not the point or comparison I'm making. Capitalism, the system of capitalism, was in real trouble in the 1930s. And the ruling elites at that time had to scramble to pull it out of real danger, or it might have gone down the tubes. In the 1990s, I don't think capitalism is in quite the same trouble it was then, although there are ominous signs that it could be, up the road a bit. But the system is still there, as far as those who rule in the corridors of our corporations and in the governments.

What is threatened at this present moment may not be the system of capitalism, but what is threatened is the country called Canada. That's something we're going to have to grapple with. The question is whether or not we really do believe that those who put this country together - starting with the aboriginal peoples - that the land of society we've tried to build on the northern half of this continent was truly a distinct society against our powerful neighbors to the south. Whether or not we really believe this is going to be a fundamental question that will motivate us, I believe, in the months and years ahead. That is the challenge we're going to have to face, and face squarely.

The next two years are going to be critical ... We have to realize that at certain moments people are called to act, people are called to give leadership. That leadership must come from the people in the communities, in the sectors, in the regions, at all levels. And this is a moment, I think, when that kind of leadership is being called forward. We will be into a major federal election two years up the road, no question. It will be the most critical election in the history of this country. How we go about preparing ourselves for that election, the movement we build towards that, and what we accomplish from that, is going to be the major test of the next two or three years.

THEMES

I'd like to comment on three themes that I hear emerging out of your discussion so far. They relate to what you have been talking about here in terms of the Action Canada Network in Alberta: your plan of action, the way you're organizing and the way you're going to move forward. The three themes are: first, the politics of social movements; second, the politics of social protest; and third, the politics of social transformation. All three of these themes have been present in your discussions, and they are themes that we must keep in the forefront of our thoughts and in our actions as we look ahead to the next two years.

One: the Politics of Social Movements

Coalition Building;

First, then, the politics of social movements. We have begun over the past four years to build a social movement of a more permanent nature in this country. I think we can say at this moment in time that there has not been such a broad based coalition and long-lasting social movement put together before in the history of this country. But that is no reason for complacency. The fact remains that we must really build a coalition and social movement involving people from different sectors and regions in this province and right across the country, the kind of coalition that will have the capacity to challenge and stop the Tory government and its corporate agenda which is tearing this country apart. That is the challenge we have and the challenge that has been clearly underscored at the national level of the Action Canada Network.

We have to realize that we are up against another coalition, a coalition of forces on the right that are dictating and determining the economic, social, environmental, and cultural directions of this country—certainly through most of the 1980s. I refer, of course, to the Business Council on National Issues, that coalition of the 150 largest corporations and banks in the country ... They are the transnational corporations which have been laying out the blueprints and the directions, from the time in which the country moved ahead with the free trade deal to the very moment that rm talking about right now-the laying out of the blueprint for the constitutional reform the Mulroney govemment will follow. That's the coalition we're up against. We have to realize that we must build and continue this coalition in order to challenge and stop that corporate agenda from advancing any further.

In this process of coalition building, which you know only too well from this conference, we have to learn to work together across different sectors: the environmental groups, farm groups, labour unions; people from anti-poverty groups. aboriginal organizations and churches; senior citizens and a variety of other groups and organizations. We come together out of our different sectors, we come together with our own ways of talking about our own constituencies and our own concerns. But we have to learn to listen to one another. We have to learn to hear what it means to listen and to walk in the moccasins of the other person, to understand what that person is saying and why an issue is so important to them.

We found the struggles of labour unions, that's why it is so important to fight back in terms of strikes. But at the same time, what happens with farmers faced with credit problems and bankruptcies, what does it mean for them to fight back? Or what does it mean for aboriginal people to deal with the fact that they have gone through centuries, now, of broken promises and unfulfilled promises with respect to the settlement of land claims. These frustrations and these modes of action, we have to understand from each other.

We also realize that in putting together coalitions we come together across different regions. I know that nationally, with all the difficulties and complexities of this country, and I still keep learning every day about how difficult it is and how many more things there are to learn. Within a province like Alberta you know the differences between Calgary and Edmonton, but you know the differences in terms of the rural and hinterland areas of the province, the north, the urban centres--and the importance of building bridges now and building a real coalition of people that can work together. This is a monumental task; but it's not only a political task. it's also a cultural task. It's a task where we have to understand the values and the attitudes and the aspirations of the people we represent, and the people that other people represent. We have to try to understand what it means to build bridges between them.

At the national level, we have had to try to do that and work in ways that we 're still learning. When we have an assembly and delegates are sent from the Alberta coalition and also every other regional coalition, plus the national organizations, when we get together at that level we have a lot of debate, we have a lot of discussion, we have lots of proposals. Somehow, over the course of the last few years, people have learned to listen to one another. So that when there is a major debate on the floor, people really do treat each other with respect. They listen to the arguments, they counter with other arguments; but in the end, they realize that there has to be give and take, that consensus has to be reached.

The women's movement, and feminism in general, has been an important contribution to this way of doing things. And so, too, in a unique way, has been the aboriginal movement. Because the aboriginal people take the time to let people talk it out and to hear the arguments. And they hear what's really on people's minds. I think that this process is as important as almost anything else as we move forward, because it is a new form and a new approach to democracy. It is something that we are talking about, that we have to implement in terms of our working together if we're really going to have a democratic process.

Quebec;  
At the national level of the Action Canada Network: we, too, have gone through some major changes. All the way through 1989 and 1990 we were faced with a challenge from our Quebec sisters and brothers, that there was definitely something wrong with the way in which the network: was operating at the national level. Finally, in June of last year, we had a major session and we opened the whole thing up when we came forward with proposals to set up a special task force. That task force was put together prior to the collapse of Meech Lake; it worked during the period of the collapse of Meech Lake and the Oka crisis throughout last summer. We came forward with some really interesting proposals for change in our mode of operation.

The interesting thing about this story is that the people who were there from the Quebec organizations were largely committed to Quebec as a nation; they were committed to the fact that they're a people, and the people they represented understood themselves as a distinct culture and nation. But when it came down to looking at whether or not it would make sense for the Quebec organizations to move off on their own and to have their own pro-Quebec network (if you want to call it that)-and we would have the Pro-Canada Network and then we would have some kind of working relationship between the two--they said: "No.” The Quebec organizations said: "We want to be a part of this pan-Canadian Network. We want to be a part of it because we 're up against forces in our own province that arc trying to paint nationalism in a right wing direction." And they said: "We want to be in touch on a regular basis and work side by side with our sisters and brothers elsewhere in Canada who are fighting for a progressive economic and social future." And that was a real turning point.

In the Assemblies that we've had since then, when we've had major discussions as to how things are going on in Quebec, the people that have come from the different regional coalitions, provincial coalitions and the national organizations heard insights about the reality in Quebec. They heard about what's really going on there, what they've never heard before and can't get from our newspapers and can't get any other way. It just proves how important it is to try to hold this together in terms of a pan-Canadian network. Who knows what the future will hold? But whatever the future is, whether there's a separate and independent Quebec or not, whether we have a Canada with Quebec or a Canada without Quebec, we are in a much better position to face up to those challenges than we ever were before with respect to the political future of this country.

Networking:

We've had to change in other ways as well. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women, for example, has put forward a very important challenge to the network. They said that the network is made up of labour unions, community organizations, social organizations--that's the centre of the network, it is focussed largely on economic and social policy. But there are other movements in this country that are up against the corporate agenda in the Mulroney government and they're fighting back, too. They include the environmental movement. Yes, we have environmental groups within the network, but somehow we haven't made a breakthrough in terms of real working relationships in the broad number of environmental groups. The other movements also include equality seeking groups like the physically disabled. like racial minorities and ethnic minorities, like gays and lesbians. These are people, too, who are hurting; they are being hurt very much by the policies and by the destruction that's going on.

Instead of trying to open up and say "come in, to the Action Canada Network and form one big coalition," we're saying "no, let's just work together and see how it grows and develops." So, we've begun a series of round tables. It's a very fascinating interaction that's going on between representatives of the Action Canada Network nationally and these other groups. And hopefully out of that, the networking will broaden. Not necessarily in a structure, an organizational or tied down way, but in a flexible way like we've been talking about, keeping things simple and flexible. And that's been important.

International Solidarity:

The other area in which we have grown and expanded, is on the international front. The relationships with Mexico and with the United States are certainly the beginning of something much bigger and much broader. The kind of outreach that's going on internationally and globally is really quite remarkable, the solidarity that's been built up-because it's not a one way street. Those who have been involved in international work will recall the fact that we often do something for third world countries. But here we're locked into a situation where our only hope lies in identifying those mutual interests that we both have in common. Out of that, real solidarity is developed-not a fake solidarity, but real solidarity.

We had Cuauhtemoc Cardenas here from Mexico for three days; we had discussions in Toronto and Montreal, and we had a big round table in Ottawa on April 17. Interaction was going on between people from different popular groups with Cardenas as the leader of the opposition party in Mexico (the Party of the Democratic Revolution). We were looking at alternatives, trying to find a key that would unlock the door to our common future. That's the new politics that we're striving for, that's the new movement we're building. And it's going to have a real significance up the road a bit.

A Caring Community

Well, through all of this, I think that when we talk about the politics of social movements, we are taking about the bringing of people together across different sectors and across different regions. What we seem to have in common with one another is that both we and the people we represent are the victims of the corporate agenda, the centerpiece of which is the free trade deal. And that’s the political catalyst that allowed us to come together in the late '80s and is allowing us to stay together in the 1990's. But it's a catalyst that lets us also look to the future in terms of alternatives.

Finally, I want to say with respect to the politics of social movements, no matter what we do, no matter what action plans we come up with, no matter what strategies we develop, we must at the same time develop a political culture that allows us to be a caring community for one another. That we look after one another, that we watch for burnout, that we support one another-these are the things that are really essential. Because these are the human dimensions. And if we do not take care of the human dimensions, the movement will not be in much shape two years up the road from now, to fight the real battle we have to fight. So let's pledge ourselves here and now to take care of one another in a human and community way.

Two: The Politics of Social Protest

Social Protest Agenda

Secondly, let me go on to the politics of social protest. A major task in front of us, that you have before you at this conference, is the task of putting together a social protest agenda that is aimed at truly challenging and trying to stop the corporate agenda itself. Recognizing what is happening with the economic and social policies of this government, that it is tearing this country apart economically, socially, culturally-and now, we will argue, more and more politically and constitutionally as well. When we realize that the free trade deal has been at the centre of that. and when we realize that we cannot sit on our hands and just hope that things will change, social protest is going to be critical to draw people's attention to the fact that we must mobilize and escalate. There is no way out of it.

Escalating protests have to be a part of what lies ahead in the next number of months. Otherwise, what is out there in terms of anger, anger that can be translated into real political action for change, will quickly dissipate into cynicism, frustration and fear. Because the fear campaign is already on. That's the way they will fight the battle; they will fight it with fear. And we must make sure that we continue to capture the anger that we know is out there and translate it into constructive change, with alternatives in front of us...

There is a real imperative and a real challenge, and we have to pick up on that momentum nationally, right across the country. Because unless there is an escalation of social protest in the next six to eight months, we will have lost that momentum.

National Plan of Action:  
That's why in January and again in April, at the Assemblies of the Action Canada Network, we wrestled with the idea of a national plan of action. We did it by trying to come up with a sense of where things were going, to map out some common actions that will allow people to continue in their various struggles, but then come together and act in common across the country at certain key moments. There's a realization that each provincial and regional coalition will have its own action plans, as will various municipalities and communities. But, the question is, whether or not these things begin to gel in a common way at certain key moments, so that people can see an escalation of the social protest. That's why, after much debate, people realized that it was important to have a national day of action on June 1st. The focus will be on the free trade agenda, but with a particular orientation to the continental free trade talks. The reason why it's going to be June 1st is that in the United States, that's the day the fast track negotiations start up. So there's something symbolic about June 1st, but there is also something strategic - that some way of coalescing action across the country was going to be important before we head into the summer months.

The second common action has to do with the Tory national convention; that proposal came from the Ontario coalition. The Tory convention is going to be held in Toronto and the coalition said: "We've gone around to our various networks and groups in Ontario and we feel that *this* is a moment when people can mobilize and coalesce around the convention." That idea caught fire within the assembly and people said: "Yes, something can happen in Toronto. But maybe something can happen elsewhere, too."

Then, the final major step in the short-term action plan had to do with October 26; the Canadian Labour Congress has put together some proposals on that. Time wise, we felt that it was going to be extremely important that there be a point in the latter part of October where people across the country would be involved in common action.

So, in the final analysis, we have to see these next six to eight months as times in which the social protest will escalate, escalate to the point where. as things slip into a constitutional dialogue in the country, people start to feel they must come together around unity. Then maybe we can, through these social protests, begin to get through to people that the real problem is the corporate agenda itself. That those who are representing the corporate agenda politically through the government must be changed and must be thrown out. That's the kind of challenge we're faced with in mobilizing an escalating social protest.

Three: The Politics of Social Transformation

Toward as People's Agenda;  
Finally, invariably, I want to come to the whole question about the politics of social transformation. We have to come up with alternatives in terms of economic policies and social policies. We are in the midst of the political and constitutional restructuring of the country we know today as Canada. The status quo cannot remain as is. There will be changes and we are going to have to work at those changes. The politics of social transformation demand that we come up with an alternative platform, an alternative platform that has some degree of consensus and support in the various sectors of our movement and in the various regions that comprise that movement. And this is going to be a major task in the next two years--building that alternative and building that people's agenda.

We have to realize that not only have we lived through the last six years of restructuring of this country along lines which we totally abhor and disagree with. but that the restructuring is continuing at an even more rapid pace than we ever imagined. I don't think anybody in this room realized that the pace of implementation of the free trade deal- which has affected all aspects of economic, social, cultural and political development in this country- would proceed at such a rapid rate. The process of disintegration has been incredible. We must find a way of coming back with an alternative platform to fight this off.

The centerpiece and the cornerstone of that alternative platform will have to include two major thrusts. On the one hand, there is going to have to be a public case made and a strategy put forward for people to understand and agree to the abrogation of the U.S.-Canada free trade deal. And secondly, hand in hand with that, must be an alternative platform of economic, social, environmental and constitutional priorities that will have to be put forward as a people's agenda for the future.

Abrogation and alternatives ~ two sides of the same coin. We cannot talk about abrogation without talking about alternatives. We must have the alternatives in place. That's part of what's been going on, at one level, in our discussions with Mexico and the United States. We have begun to put forward an alternative continental development and trade package that is in the interests of the peoples that comprise our three countries, not in the interest of the corporate agenda itself.

Now in terms of working on those alternatives and trying to develop them. in the last Assembly there was a great deal of discussion about starting a process of People's Charters. The objective of this is not to come out with a blueprint. but to encourage various provincial coalitions. various organizations that are pan of our movement, to give thought to what would constitute a people's agenda, a people's charter. What are the economic priorities. the social priorities. the environmental and cultural priorities that we want to see?

The Action Canada Network at the national level will be putting together a kit that can be used to encourage member groups and coalitions to develop their own version of the people's charter. And up the road a bit, there will be an event that will pull together representatives to come and actually put together what we might consider a pan-Canadian People's Charter. This is a challenge, but one that I think is consistent with the democratic process and the principles that we have.

At the same time, we also have to give leadership and make it happen. The backup studies are also going to have to happen through various organizations like the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the various research groups that are being coalesced now. We should be coming up with much more in terms of background studies and alternatives, industrial strategies for Canada, alternative trade policies and things like this. We have to have a process that involves people in taking ownership over the alternatives for the future. So that's the kind of thing we're going to be working on and developing.

Electoral Politics:  
Finally, as I think about the politics of social trans- formation, we must look ahead at what it means to think electorally and politically about the next federal election. If we believe in our analysis, it's going to be the most critical election in our history. Then we must plan for that, we must think in new ways about electoral politics. I, for one-and I'm not saying this is the position of the Action Canada Network-believe that we cannot look at the forthcoming election with the same eyes and the same framework that we've looked at any of the other elections in the last number of years, or for that matter, perhaps any other election in our history. And it's not only because the issues are so urgent. It's because of the kind of party politics that are forming in this country.

We cannot look at the 1993 spring election--which I think is when it's going to be-we cannot look at that election in the same way that we looked at the '88 election. For one thing, there will be five, maybe six parties in the running. There are two parties that have a toe-hold on regional blocks-the Reform Party in the West, the Bloc Quebecois in Quebec. We have to realize that there are shifting political lines that are going on within each of the major parties, but particularly within the NDP, shifting political lines as people are wondering which way to bend, go right or left. I would say that we don't have to be most concerned about who will form the majority government, because I don't think there will be any party that will emerge with a majority in the next federal election. But we have to be concerned about what coalition will be formed, and whether that coalition will be on the right or on the left.

Make no mistake about it. Just because Mulroney comes into Calgary and does his number on the Reform Party, make no mistake about it, that suddenly there is an incredible unbreachable cleavage between the Tory government and the Reform Party. Mulroney will do the same thing in a few months, he will go into Quebec and do a number on the Bloc Quebecois and will put them in their place or will try to, just like he tried it with the Reform Party. But I suggest to you, that's political posturing. Up the road a bit, their game plan is that there will be the maintenance of these policies on the right-and the corporate agenda-through some kind of coalition party politics involving one or both of these two new parties.

Now, I think we must keep that in mind. And we must turn our sights to the left. I'm sorry for those people who have difficulty with right and left, and all of that. Because in this instance, there is no political centre in the country. There is no political centre, not yet. There may be two years up the road a bit, but now there isn't. And the question is: "What kind of political formation is it going to take on the left?" Once again, I don't think we can simply put our sights in terms of one political party and say, "it's there." We have to work hard because I don't believe any one political party can possibly emerge with the majority. So we have to work hard at coalition party politics on the left. To take seriously the NDP and the New Democrats, of course, but to take seriously and look critically at what is really possible with the Liberal Party. And we have to look elsewhere, as well, in terms of the independent left. If at this moment we do not understand the significance of coalition politics on the left, we will have lost. I can't say anything more, with more urgency and more concern and more emphasis, than the fact that we have to turn our sights in that direction.

We in a social movement are not a political party. I don't know if that will happen or not, but we are not a political party. Our role is to till the ground and cultivate the soil with respect to creating the political and cultural space for progressive party politics. That's our job. And if we do our job right, if we really build and cultivate that ground, then the parties who form that coalition politics on the left are going to have to respond to it. We'll have to stimulate that to some extent, yes, we '11have to push it, we'll have to force it at times. But they cannot exist without us. And we, in turn, in terms of real social transformation and the politics of social transformation, cannot exist without political party formation that takes up our cause in the direction we have to move.

CONCLUSIONS:

So we talked about the alternatives, we talked about a people's charter. we talked about an agenda that's going to have to be put forth, it has abrogation on the one hand and alternatives on the other. We 're going to have to make sure that we 're clear about that in the social movement across this country and that we are also clear in our discourse with the political parties that have come together on the left. I'm not saying that all these points have been discussed and worked out clearly in the Action Canada Network at the national level, but I do believe they are part of the challenge that we've got to face. And I also believe that we have to think step by step as we move through the next few years, be very clear about what we just talked about here.

The building of social movements and the politics involved in that. we must have clear in front of us. The building of the social protest, the escalation of it and the politics involved in that, we must be clear about. And the building of an agenda for social transformation and the politics that must be involved in that. we must be clear about. These are the three pillars upon which we must hold these things together, that's the course which we must follow and try to put together in the next couple of years.

Finally, I started off in my opening remarks by referring to the 1930s, back to our grandparents, our grandmothers and grandfathers, our mothers and fathers in some cases, who were involved in those struggles at that time. They made decisions and they took action. We must ask ourselves about the future generations, about our children, about our daughters and sons, and about our granddaughters and our grandsons. In this particular historical moment we took a stand. We took a chance when the question was being raised-what will Canada's future be? Will the corporate agenda tear it apart or will we stop that corporate agenda and put a people's agenda in place for future generations? That's the question, I think we have to face. Each of us.in our own hearts and minds. going back to our communities and back to our workplaces tomorrow, might want to keep that question in mind.