ARM Notes/ Pre-Election panel/ Wednesday, October 2, 2019

At 6:00 pm on Wednesday, October 2, 2019, Paul Clarke, Executive Director of Action Réfugiés, welcomed about 85 people, many who were new to Action Réfugiés of Montreal. They had arrived at St Jax Montreal for the Pre-Election Panel entitled “Canada’s Integrity at Stake: Ensuring Justice for Refugeed People”.

Paul introduced Jonathan Montpetit, a CBC journalist as moderator of the discussion. Jonathan began by stating that the refugee process continues to surge into public discourse. Jean Nicolas Beuze, UNHCR Representative in Canada, Megan Bradley, Associate Professor of Political Science and the Study of International Development at McGill University and Mitch Goldberg, Refugee lawyer and former president of the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers were a collective ‘tour de force’ as stories behind the statistics, regions, countries, Canada’s history of protection of refugees claimants and real life on the ground.

➢ According to the panelists, Canadians have many reasons to be proud. Our Immigration and Refugee Board, albeit slow, works very effectively independently of government. The euphoria experienced in the welcome of 25,000 Syrian refugees speaks highly of who we are and can be. The reality is that Canada gets a great return on our ‘investment’ for it does not take long before someone who entered Canada asking for refuge is soon contributing positively to our country. Rather than being fearful of those asking for asylum, Canadians can be very proud.

➢ Yet, the panelists noted the current backlash against refuge seekers in Canada and elsewhere with the numbers increasing to 26 million. Lamentably, sixty percent of Canadians believe that Canada is accepting too many refugees, that is, non-white refugees. Some members of the media bear responsibility for shaping Canadians response to refugees for they often whip up a frenzy against asylum seekers thus creating a strong negative perception. This is simply unacceptable.

➢ According to our speakers, the refugee situation is NOT a crisis and yet Canada’s contribution is still very modest compared to other countries. Canada is doing almost nothing for the Rohingya, Central Americans, Venezuelans, and Africans. The collective mantra throughout the evening was clearly - CANADA CAN DO BETTER. Canada can respond much more fairly to people who arrive at our borders asking for asylum.
Questions that were posed include: Is it time to look at ourselves more honestly? Is it time to push back on the growing xenophobia and populism? How can we preserve a spirit of respectful conversation that reflects Canada’s principles and values? How can we bring a sense of reality to the forefront?

No doubt the climax of the evening came in the discussion about the Canada–United States Safe Third Country Agreement. Our expert panelists stated that this policy has devastatingly painful consequences on the lives of people fleeing serious danger. Many who are forced to come across our borders seeking refuge have no choice but to do so irregularly. If they were to arrive at an official point of entry they would be turned back to the United States of America which some claim is no longer a safe country. Recently, the Canadian government adopted changes making even more categories of persons ineligible to make a refugee claim. This leaves people with a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment application, which means claimants are not allowed witnesses, they do not have an appeal, and the very restrictive interview results in second-class refugee claimants. The Canada–United States Safe Third Country Agreement is not working; Canada and the US do not appear to share the same principles.

Some ways suggested to encourage Canada to take on more refugees rather than fewer:

- Raise your voice;
- Financially contribute to the UNHCR which often does not even have sufficient funding to feed people in camps;
- Cultivate sources in media – people you trust;
- Remember that journalists want to be accurate and are mortified when they get it wrong;
- Recall that pressure from civil society groups works.

If an important part of the commitment of Action Réfugiés is to provide up-to-date information to those seeking asylum, the mandate was honoured par excellence as the three panellists with remarkable skill and passion engaged the audience for almost two hours.

In thanking the three panellists, ARM staff, and the audience, Paul Clarke captured the spirit of the discourse with a quote from Mary Jo Leddy, a long time refugee advocate and founder of Romero House, a centre of refugees in Toronto.

“Why are we here? We are here to take up responsibility for this place on earth, for the sake of the whole earth.” (Why Are We Here?, A Meditation on Canada, Mary Jo Leddy, 2019 Novalis Publishing Inc., p. 82)