

CANADIANS FILLED VOID LEFT BY LEADERS

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✘ By Carol Goar, [The Toronto Star](#), 28 December 2009

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For all the setbacks, disappointments, worrying trends and lost opportunities that dominated the news in 2009, it wasn't Canada that failed. It was the nation's leaders.

Stephen Harper, Michael Ignatieff and Jack Layton let the public down and paralyzed Parliament with their wearisome brinksmanship. But Canadians rolled up their sleeves and tackled the problems their politicians were neglecting.

Ottawa misfired by pouring billions of taxpayers' dollars into slow-acting stimulus schemes that produced more self-congratulatory rhetoric than results. But Canadians blunted the impact of the recession by refusing to panic, looking out for their neighbours and behaving as normally as their financial circumstances allowed.

The Prime Minister was mute at the Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen. He missed the United Nations General Assembly to tour a Tim Hortons' facility in Oakville. But Canada's premiers, mayors and citizens found ways of letting the world know Harper doesn't speak for everyone. They signalled in word and deed that the nation is still trying to be a responsible member of the global community.

It was a bruising year. It diminished Canada's reputation. But the country isn't broken.

Here are a few of the reasons I continue to believe in this nation:

- As the recession took hold, I watched people reaching into their own pockets, volunteering their

time and raising funds to do what their tax dollars should be doing. For the most part, they didn't want recognition. They wanted help and they wanted other Canadians to join them in pressing public officials to back the responsibilities they abdicated. It felt good to live in a country where there are 10 can-do community leaders for every can't-do politician.

- After years of being pecked to pieces, medicare found a champion. Heading into 2009, it looked as though Canada's doctors had given up on publicly funded health care. For two years running, they had elected outspoken advocates of privatization to head the Canadian Medical Association. Both men had used their terms to spread the message that medicare was unwieldy, outmoded and unaffordable.

But this year, a strong defender of publicly funded health care, backed by a group of young physicians, stepped forward. He sought and won the presidency. Dr. Jeff Turnbull, chief of staff at Ottawa Hospital, vows to use his term – which begins in 2010 – to strengthen medicare from within.

- Solidarity, almost written off as a tattered remnant of labour's glory days, popped up in new places.

The first was the hard-to-organize temporary workers' sector. By banding together, low-wage earners, employed by dozens of temporary agencies to provide cheap labour for private companies and public institutions, won basic employment rights – holiday pay, termination and severance pay, written job descriptions and protection from abusive bosses – from the Ontario government. They also wrung a commitment out of Queen's Park to spend \$10 million hiring workplace inspectors to enforce these standards.

The second place where unity worked was the anti-poverty movement. By sticking together in the face of government inaction, a province-wide coalition of low-income Ontarians prevented Premier Dalton McGuinty from sliding out of his pledge to review the province's harsh, stifling welfare rules. It took 11 months of exhorting and badgering. Finally, as the year drew to a close, the government appointed a nine-member advisory panel of anti-poverty activists to identify what needs to be fixed and draw up a work plan. It wasn't a breakthrough, but it kept the issue on the provincial agenda.

Across the nation – except in Ottawa – there were heartening examples of Canadians pitching in, reaching out, working together and making a difference.

