

Prologue
Fractures, Continuities and Re-Learning: Civic and Political Participation of Latin American-Canadians.

By
Luz Bascuñán

*They came first for the Communists,¹
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant
Then they came for me,
And by that time no one was left to speak up.*

The present volume includes works that reflect the variety of experiences of Latin Americans living in Canada, and the reasons why they left their countries of origin. In my opinion, in order to achieve an enhanced seminal foundation, it is imperative to obtain information from ourselves. This type of work would allow us to share diverse experiences from different perspectives and through a variety of literary genre that would allow us to anthologize our knowledge.

In the majority of cases of political exile, the intensity and frequency of political participation changes during the process of negotiating settlement in the host society. In some cases, people who had a high level of political participation in their home countries, drastically reduce their participation. In other cases, participation does not suffer any discontinuity. People who maintain an active political participation in the new milieu have the tendency, in high proportion, to remain connected with the political process of the country of origin; and this is a natural process, as one would expect. In my case, and as well for many Chileans and Latin Americans, my political participation started immediately after my arrival to Canada. For many of us, during the first period of our political exile, we concentrated in sorting out the events and problems from our countries

¹ In [Spanish](#)-speaking countries the poem has been often erroneously attributed to [Bertolt Brecht](#) since the [1970s](#). The poem's exact origin is unclear, and some historians have suggested that the poem arose after Niemöller's death.^[1] More recent research has traced the sentiments expressed in the poem to speeches given by Niemöller in [1946](#).^[2]

of origin. We helped our peers who were persecuted by the dictatorship and we tried to maintain our links with the party and the resistance groups. It was a type of work focused on the creation of structures, communication networks and the activation of contacts and the mobilization of activities of international solidarity. Later this participation was extended to other Latin American countries. It was an epoch when Latin Americans suffered from dictatorship regimes and widespread human rights abuses; meanwhile Canada was receiving other people exiled from many Latin American countries.

However, it is interesting to note that we, political exiles, live with the suitcases packed ready for the return as soon as democracy is re-established in our countries. In many cases, however, the dictatorship lasts longer than we expected at the beginning, and then after a while we begin to establish roots in this new country, also we are maintaining a limited role in the events of our new society. Until we come to the realization that we have lost our ability to carry out our democratic right to politically participate in both societies: the one that we have left due to exile and the new one, where we are living now. This was an important moment, because we became aware that we were losing our prime objective of becoming active participants in the civil society and we were losing our historic role as promoters of social change. Therefore, this marked the beginning of the chapter of active political participation in Canadian politics. However, our new political participation style does not reflect the level or intensity of our previous political participation in our countries of origin.

The reasons that drive people to active and formal political participation are several and diverse; in my case, my concern for political activity took place in a natural way immediately after my arrival in Canada. As an educator, my central preoccupation was education and also was the political process. Canada and specially the Province of Ontario, offered me a large area for analysis and exploration of the school system. It was very different from ours! It seemed more democratic and less hierarchical- perhaps something similar to the Education System that the dictatorship had eliminated in Chile. I remember that around the late seventy's, I began to participate in the discussion and outlining process of educational policies. I met members of my district school board and I was interested in their findings. I supported electoral campaigns from the open-minded

candidates and I followed their management practices. In 1990 I accepted the nomination as a candidate for school board member in the city of Toronto. It was not an easy decision. My experience as an activist was as a grass-root member within parties highly hierarchical and highly structured in the “Democratic Centralism”. I was afraid that if I were elected I would enter into a “political professionalism”. However, my interest was to improve the representation and awareness of the school system for the needs of the working class and immigrant communities. The unspoken and outspoken pressures from my friends and community members were able to overcome my original resistance. As a result on November 1990 I was elected as a representative member of the school board in District 11 and 12 for the city of Toronto.

To become the first Chilean and Latin American woman elected by the popular will was an incredible experience and a teaching experience for my community. I still remember how –also the Canadian Left and the open-minded sectors from the educational labour unions - the whole Latin American community bent over backwards during the campaign. They were the last weeks of a snowy and chilly November, and some days my heart was broken when I saw my friends getting frozen while they placed posters and knocked on doors. I vividly remember the volunteer who went with me day after day during my campaign with his video camera, and which was some times it was covered with snow.

- Nelson, are you cold? Really it is very cold today; why don't you take a break?

–I suggested - Not at all. I cannot loose this opportunity of filming this historic event and help to elect the first Chilean and the first Latin-American in Canada - Nelson always said this to me.

Among hundreds of people that were working for my campaign some of them told me, apologetically: “I would like to vote for you, but I am not a Canadian citizen yet”. Others explained their refugee application process and others told stories about their lack of legal status and their fear of being deported with their small children. Their stories strengthened me.

This group of fabulous human beings were my constant source of inspiration during this and my other campaigns. I have no doubt that my election was a collective process of mutual encouragement. Meanwhile my Latin-American companions gave force to triumph; I gave them strength to participate in the civil Canadian society. Hispanic parents and immigrant parents generally felt that my election “was possible to achieve”. These feelings had a motivational effect on me.

During the provincial election in 1994, the conservative party assumed power in the province. The Ministry of Education exaggerated the problems in the educational system and argued that there was a crisis. Immediately he reduced the decision making power of the community and the local government in educational matters. He practically eliminated the role of professors, parents and elected community members. This dramatically changed the educational system of the province. The government no longer supported grassroots participation from parents and community representatives. From this moment on, school councillors lost their capability to develop educational policies related with the children and school needs. At this moment, I decided to withdraw my participation, and during the election of 1997, I did not run as a candidate. This decision closed a chapter of great political participation in the local government. by the Latin American people.

During my first period as a councillor, my activity was connected emotionally with the needs of children and youth from the Latin American community. My academic experience kept telling me that our children were not achieving academically. Soon I was aware that a high percentage of our children were attending basic level programs at the high school and many were placed in Special Education Programs. Placement standardized test were discriminatory, linguistically and culturally against them. Also I learned that many teenagers were loosing their mother tongue and were loosing their ability to communicate with their parents and family members. Often parents did not understand the school expectations, because they did not understand how the school system was functioning. In summary, our children were left behind. Beside this reality and my natural connection with the community; my objective was also there, to transform the school system into a social agent of change.

It was a febrile activity during this period. I had short time and many plans to develop. The school board was divided by two political opposites. It required that the councillors add voters or loose the battle. Immediately after I got elected, I introduced my first proposal: the creation of a youth camp for training future Latin American leaders. It was a beautiful project that was run during the entire period of my tenure as councillor and it allowed many youth to be trained as leaders. Some youth obtained leadership roles in the student movement like Gabriela, a Venezuelan youth. She was the first Latin American student to get elected as president of the High School Student Federation. Many, who attended this youth training camp, participated in extraordinary international events. As an example, I remember a Salvadorian youth, after his completion of this program, decided to extend his participation as leader toward the democratization process in South Africa. The youth camp allowed many Latin American students to become aware and denounced discriminatory acts against them in their schools, and allowed them to combat racism. It was an enriching experience for a large number of youths.

As an educator, as a mother and as a member of the community, one of my concerns was the fact that the school system did not recognize the value of children's mother tongue. The fact that children were able to speak Spanish or other languages, was perceived, by the schools system as a liability rather than as an ability. Therefore, one of my objectives was to identify strategies for the promotion of teaching them their mother tongue and at the same time to help to empower immigrant parents. Programs of support for the preservation of cultural and language heritage (with Spanish as the first language and English as the second language) and programs that promoted parents participation were aimed to promote an equitable and antiracist school system.

For Latin American parents it was an extraordinary experience. Before my election, school councillors did not have clear practices for integration; therefore, many parents did not participate. Also, the majority of school meetings were carried out in English, there were no interpreters available for the parents who did not have a command of the English language. Very seldom did the meetings address the

concerns of Latin American parents. Spite of the fact, that the percentages of Latin American parents were low at that time, during my tenure through the district networks, Hispanic parents massively participated. Even though, many of them never dared to participate before in their children's school; now, many of them are in leadership positions. In each of the schools, Hispanic parents began to feel represented with a Spanish-speaking school councillor who knew about their culture who showed interest in their children's education and who was able to interpret their aspirations for an enhancement of their children's education.

In spite of these accomplishments, it is important to point out that the participation from the Latin American community in the Canadian political landscape is not always easy. In spite of the fact that people can overcome the language barriers; we have to battle constantly with discrimination and racism. Racism, instead of inhibiting our participation, should give us more energy to act upon; because, this situation must change. Besides that, we must set a balance between the participation in this milieu and our countries of origin.

Another problem that intensifies as a barrier to participation is the lack of support to known political figures. It is not only in Canada, but is present in other countries also. My experience has taught me that there is scarce recognition of the work that elected representatives do. Public opinion has the tendency to generalize that all politicians are corrupt. Without a doubt there are politicians that are neither competent nor honest workers; however there are other politicians that are honest workers and competent. I feel that there is a lack of public knowledge regarding the civic efforts that an elected representative makes on behalf of the common good. As an example, I never in my life worked as hard as a councillor. My work schedule was from Monday to Sunday and everyday I arrived home between ten or eleven o'clock at night.

From the point of view of previous knowledge, it is clear that the civic experience acquired in our countries of origin increases the overall quality of our participation in Canada. As an example, my participation in the Canadian political landscape was

possible because of the formative experience that I acquired when I participated in the Chilean political process. Nevertheless, in polarized societies like Latin American during the 70's; our major concern was to aid in the development of the democratic process and fight against the dictatorships. Obviously, after our arrival in Canada our concerns changed. After all, Canada is a democratic country that allows freedom of political participation to almost all its inhabitants. For many Latino Americans it was necessary to re-learn the focus of our battles. We have learned, as an example, that everybody has the right to freedom, right to equality regardless of sexual orientation, race, social origin, income or educational level. We learned that every one of us has the right to have a space in society and we must learn to respect it. Here in Canada we learned, as a community to be less chauvinistic, less racists, and less homophobic than in our countries of origin.

As a final reflection, I would like to say that when we are truthful with our political ideology and we value the democratic process, then we participate in the historic moment in which we are living. In order for this process to take place, it is necessary that each person become responsible to fulfill a role within society. I feel that one of my responsibilities as a person and as a citizen is to promote democratic values. Therefore, if I am living in Chile I participate in a political party, or if I am living in Canada, I participate in a social movement. It is my duty to aid and to enrich these processes of political participation and to contribute to the creation of a better society for all: a just society, more egalitarian and more democratic.

Luz Bascuñán arrived in Canada in the mid 70's, It was a gloomy time for the democracy in many Latin American countries. In her personal case, she and her family had to leave their country, Chile after a military *coup d'état* that overthrew a democratically elected government and imposed one of the most brutal dictatorships of the Twentieth Century on to the people. In Chile, Luz had a high level of civic and political participation since her adolescence. After receiving her High School Teaching degree from the University of Chile, she worked as a faculty in primary and secondary schools and as educational researcher in both educational areas. Her areas of expertise are history, geography, economics and political education.

In Canada, Luz Bascuñán completed her Master's Degree at the Geography Department of the University of Toronto and worked on her Doctorate at the Department of Political and Educational Theory at the Ontario Institute of Educational Studies at the University of Toronto. During the 70's, Luz was the first president of the Toronto Chilean Society. During the 80's she was the founder and head of the Salvador Allende School and was a co-founder of the Latin American Students Association from the University of Toronto. During the 90's she had the honour of being the first immigrant woman elected in Canada by popular vote; she was elected and re-elected twice as a school councillor for the school board in Toronto, during the municipal election. During her tenure as councillor, Luz cooperated in the development of programs for studies for school counsellors and initiated numerous projects aimed at the promotion of opportunities for learning for marginalized children and youth, including children and youth from the Latino American community. Recently, Luz founded the school of Peace Pioneers; it is a multidisciplinary program that focuses on helping in the promotion of peace goals and social justice for Latino-American children.

Translated by :
Neyda H. Long, PhD
June , 2006.