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 CANADIAN CENTRE  
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# FAST FACTS

**November 16, 2010**

## Who speaks for the public interest?

One of the most perverse aspects of Canadian society is the way that organized labour and other progressive organizations are dismissed as special interest groups and marginalized in public discourse about the political issues that affect the general population. This attitude is entrenched in all political jurisdictions and it is reflected in reports and commentary in the mainstream media, the statements of right-wing politicians, right-wing organizations like the Fraser Institute, the Frontier Institute, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and various business organizations. The people who speak for business organizations, including Chambers of Commerce, are, in contrast, courted by all levels of government for their views on matters that have profound implications for ordinary citizens (including matters that relate directly to the firms and industries they have interests in as CEOs, board presidents and major shareholders).

This perspective is at odds with the results of our research on the role of the labour movement and other organizations in society which indicate that it is labour and other marginalized groups that best represent the general interest, not business groups. That this is indeed the case was demonstrated again in the October 27, 2010 local elections in Brandon.

The recent election generated a lot of interest because of a serious challenge to the incumbent Mayor Dave Burgess (a PC supporter) from Shari Decter Hirst (a member of the NDP) who was seeking to be the first-woman mayor in Brandon in its 128 year history. At the ward level, the most interesting race was between Don Jessiman, a long-time incumbent in Green Acres ward, who distanced himself from unions, and Jan Chaboyer, president of the Brandon and District Labour Council (BDLC).

During the campaign the Chamber of Commerce made organized a luncheon debate of mayoralty candidates for its members at \$25.00 a head. The Chamber president said he was “... sure that it will prove to be the premier debate to attend over the campaign period.” *The Brandon Sun* reported that 350 people attended the event.

As well, the Chamber conducted surveys of candidates for City Council and the Brandon School Division. Recipients were directed to give “yes” or “no” answers (more nuanced answers were not accepted) to the following nine self-serving questions:

- 1) Do you agree with the position that the business tax should be reduced to encourage growth and reinvestment in our city?



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309 - 323 Portage Avenue  
 Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1  
 T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201  
 ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca  
 www.policyalternatives.ca

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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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- 2) Should Brandon implement user fees in an attempt to decrease reliance on property taxes?
- 3) Do you think Brandon needs added taxation powers with revenues targeted for dedicated purposes? For example a hotel room tax.
- 4) Do you believe that Brandon should be looking at more public-private partnerships to address the infrastructure challenges facing the city?
- 5) Do you support the philosophy that public services should be provided by those who are able to deliver them in the most cost-effective manner, using a competitive that invites private sector participants to make proposals?
- 6) Do you agree with the Chamber that Brandon needs to develop a long-term economic development strategy that has measureable results and sets benchmarks and time frames for success?
- 7) Do you believe that Brandon needs to form an economic partnership with the business community in an effort to achieve greater economic results?
- 8) Do you agree with The Chamber that a long-term strategic infrastructure strategy is needed for Brandon?
- 9) Do you agree that all road fuel taxes should be dedicated to road infrastructure?

Of the 16 council candidates, 9 responded, 7 did not. Of those who responded, the only question that was close was the one on a hotel tax which went “yes” by a margin of 5-4. All other questions were answered “yes” by an overwhelming majority; in other words, the majority of those who answered positioned themselves as pro-business candidates.

The BDLC organized two televised public debates. The first debate was for councillor candidates, the second was for mayoralty candidates. All participants in these debates were provided with a list of questions beforehand and given one minute to respond to each. The

questions - which are focused on important community issues - are as follows:

- 1) Affordable housing for modest to low income families. What is your plan or opinion?
- 2) What are your thoughts or ideas on making Brandon a “greener” city?
- 3) What is your plan for job creation, to encourage our youth to remain in Brandon?
- 4) What are your thoughts on creating a safer community?
- 5) With recreation issues in the news, what are your views to move Brandon forward?
- 6) Heritage, Culture and the Arts? What are your ideas on a general museum?
- 7) Community (Inclusive and Engaged). Moving forward what would you do?

All four candidate for mayor and 13 of the 16 candidates for council participated in these debates.

The question we end up with is: on the basis of this experience who was speaking for the public interest? The Chamber initiatives were clearly self-serving and aimed at chamber members. In contrast, the BDLC interventions not only promoted public participation and created an important venue for candidates to express their views, but also structured the debate around issues of importance to all citizens.

As it turned out, it seems that many Brandon voters figured out the answer to this question prior to voting day. Shari Decter Hirst is now the mayor of Brandon, and Jan Chaboyer the City Councillor for Green Acres Ward.

*Errol Black is a CCPA board member and former Brandon City Councillor who lost his seat in Riverview Ward by a margin of 541 to 540. Many voters have told Errol that they didn't bother to vote because they assumed he would win. The old adage that every vote counts never loses currency.*



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