It seems like a lot of time has passed since COVID-19 arrived in Canada. A year ago, so much was happening: millions of people across the globe were taking to the streets demanding climate justice, Canadians went to the polls to elect a minority government, NAFTA was being renegotiated, Vancouver was about to become a Blue Community, and the struggle for Indigenous rights was ramping up across the land.

And then COVID hit. Millions of people lost their jobs, thousands died, and the pandemic uprooted our world in once unimaginable ways. We were shocked by the tragic loss of life in long-term care homes and how fragile our social safety net had become. The pandemic also exposed what far too many have long known or experienced firsthand: that economic inequality and systemic racism are painful realities in our country.

It has been a tough year, yet there is hope. Hope in the acts of generosity and social solidarity from ordinary people in communities large and small. Hope in the heroism of our frontline workers. Hope in the slogan “A Just Recovery for All” so we don’t repeat the mistakes of the past. A just recovery is about putting peoples’ well-being first and overhauling our economic system to ensure no one is left behind. It is about environmental sustainability and a new relationship with Indigenous Peoples.

The federal government has invested billions in response to the crisis. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is promising to deliver the long overdue national pharmacare and child-care programs, and to fix Canada’s tattered social safety net. But we’ve heard these promises before and have learned that it will take real public pressure to secure these programs. That is where the Council of Canadians’ role is essential to building campaigns and carrying out effective “political bargaining” with decision makers.

Conservative premiers will be trying to sabotage these initiatives, just as they have undermined climate policies at every turn. We need to shine the spotlight on their actions and hold them accountable for failing the people of Canada.

Our mission statement says: “The Council of Canadians brings people together through collective action and grassroots organizing to challenge corporate power and advocate for people, the planet and our democracy.”

How do we expand our influence across the country and recruit new activists and supporters to drive this vision?

In this last year we have undergone many changes to renew the Council’s capacity for political action. Our grassroots structure has been revived, and thousands of members have signed up. We have a new logo and look, we expanded our social media presence, and we are offering online tools for campaign organizing and Chapter support. The Council’s Board of Directors has the most diverse leadership in our history.

We are ready for the challenges ahead, building on our past success and a strong legacy of leadership. Last June, Maude Barlow stepped down from her position with the Council as Honorary Chairperson. Since our founding in 1985, she has provided unparalleled commitment and dedication to the Council of Canadians, its values, and efforts to bring people together for progressive change. We all thank her inspiration over these many years – she has truly modeled the best of leadership in our movement.

We must learn from each other to build a culture of understanding and be bold in our demands if we are to help determine what happens next in this country. Our members, supporters and chapter activists come from every walk of life and every part of Canada. Some of our families have been on this land for thousands of years, while others have just arrived. There is so much to be done to build a better world in these coming months. Let’s join together to make it possible.

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