

2017: The year we found purpose



NADINE SHANTA MURSHED

EACH year begins with a ray of sunshine, as did 2017, oblivious to the chaos that was inevitably unleashed onto the world when some of the world's leaders

took centre stage to change the world as we know it. The right-wing wave keeps rising as we head to 2018, and chances are that it will continue to do so.

But not without a fight. Because, this year, the proverbial other shoe has already dropped. This year, we are not fearful of what is to come; we know—more or less—what to expect. We know what we have to do in 2018 to prevent further infractions of social justice.

We have to resist. We have to persist. We have to build strength and stay strong.

We have to take care of ourselves. But, we also have to remain focused. And importantly, we have to pick our battles—different battles—so that we can win the war.

The war against women. The war against minority groups. The war against the poor. The war against the people. The war against workers. The war against, against, everyone.

However, not everyone sees these wars as what they are—there are groups that present an alternative view: that the war is against men, that white-men are the most marginalised group in the world, and so on, making 2017 seem

like a year of polarisation. But given peoples' impetus to support a cause, I reframe the polarisation narrative to suggest that this is the year that people found purpose, because no matter which side people are on, it seems as though people really believe in what they believe in.

In my estimation, the year 2017 gave a cause to everyone looking for one. It gave politicians across the world a run for their political careers as they found themselves having to make hard choices, often siding against their diplomatic allies—the vote over Jerusalem being a key example of this; it provided scholars with new dimensions of existing social problems to theoretically and practically grapple with; it gave citizens the warning that their rights could be curtailed at any time. This means, in 2018, we have no option but to fight the system that produces the chaos that we see around us. We need to protest against policies that are directly and indirectly against the interests of the people. In this era of late capitalism, when corporations act like capitalists, we have to remind policymakers about the human face of policy and its ramifications. We have to recognise and protest policies that promote and result in what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession."

The good news is that some good folks are already doing this. The alternative power and energy plan for Bangladesh created by the National Committee to Protect Oil Gas Mineral Resources Power and Ports, Bangladesh (NCGRP) is an excellent example of not only protesting current policies (in this case, the Rampal project) but proposing alternative policies that could result in achieving the same goals that the Rampal project



aims to achieve in terms of meeting energy and power demands. On a more global scale, the fight against the war against women is being called upon by many of us, and it felt as if the oppressed were being called upon to explain their oppression yet again, to be critiqued and gendered at random, it created the situation where no one could claim that disbelief equality has been achieved; there was no way that one could dismiss the notion of sexual violence experienced by women, and also men and other genders, with imperatives about what they should have done (or not done, or worn, as

which threw light on the extent of the problem of sexual harassment. While this was not new for many of us, and it felt as if the oppressed were being called upon to explain their oppression yet again, to be critiqued and gendered at random, it created the situation where no one could claim that disbelief equality has been achieved; there was no way that one could dismiss the notion of sexual violence experienced by women, and also men and other genders, with imperatives about what they should have done (or not done, or worn, as

the case may be) to prevent the violation of their own bodies.

I've talked about the importance of purpose in this column before. Without purpose, life is inherently meaningless. Tautological, I know, but it still needed to be said because I think it is purpose that is, and has been, the crisis of our times. We have collectively pointed to lack of purpose as the root cause of, well, everything, from boredom to nihilism and terrorism.

The importance of meaning-making is well-established as well and I argue that without purpose we have little to make meaning of. We need goals in life, something to work towards, and something to look forward to. Scholars often cite religion as a mechanism of meaning-making, but even religion makes promises—of heaven, for instance—and provides a *raison d'être* for being "good" human beings. So if religion is opium for the masses, to take Marx's oft-used phrase out of context, it is because religion gives people a purpose. And that is why it is fairly easy to distort religion and incite, say, terrorism in its name.

But, I'm not here to preach religion. Instead, I find hope in the fact that people have found purpose—beyond religion—in this tumultuous year. I find hope in the fact that, even though we feel burnt out at times, and angry, and even hurt by the injustice around us, by the casualties of the many wars that are being waged on all corners of the world, we have it within us to look ahead, ready to take it within us that we don't always understand, or even love, but one that we are invariably trying to protect at all cost.

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Bob Rae's Rohingya report lacks a roadmap for repatriation



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

I was eagerly waiting for Bob Rae's report on the Rohingya refugees and their repatriation to Myanmar.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appointed Rae, a former premier of Ontario, as Canada's Rohingya envoy on October 23, 2017. He has been tasked with engaging in diplomacy to address the ongoing violence and advising the prime minister on how Canada should support aid efforts in the region. Rae is, therefore, the "point man" for the government of Canada on the Rohingya issue. His report and recommendations will form the basis for future policy and actions by the government and the most marginalised group in the world, and so on, making 2017 seem



A Rohingya refugee looks at the full moon with a child in tow at Balukhali refugee camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on December 3, 2017.

PHOTO: SUSANA VERA

meetings with officials at the UN headquarters in New York.

The report focuses on three important areas: first, the humanitarian crisis resulting from the recent exodus of over 600,000 Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh and another 120,000 in abusive camp life in Rakhine state; secondly, the need to ensure the return of refugees to their homes with

full political and social rights restored, which were so far denied by the largely Buddhist state; and finally, a proper and credible investigation of what happened during systematic gathering of evidence of wrongdoing.

The report thus underscores the need to inquire into the ethnic cleansing and slaughtering of Rohingyas including children and women. It is laudable that Rae has

sexual violence and abuse at the hands of the Myanmar military and security forces.

The atrocities continue to this day, and unless it is handled strongly by the international community, the situation will likely turn into one paralleling what Bosnia suffered between 1992 and 1995 or Rwanda in 1994. Even Myanmar is aware of the gravity of the situation, which was evident when a UN human rights investigator on a fact-finding mission was recently denied access to the country, particularly to western Rakhine State. The UN wants Myanmar to stop the ethnic cleansing or face trials in the international court of law. The international community, therefore, should take it on an urgent basis.

While the recent bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar for repatriation of the refugees is a positive first step, this will not be enough for voluntary repatriation of refugees due to the lack of basic protection, security and human rights for Rohingyas in Myanmar. There is no room for forced repatriation. The international community must address these issues and work towards creating appropriate conditions for repatriation. Rae has rightly observed that there is no room for a quick fix or rapid repatriation.

The interim report also presents in great detail the squalid conditions in the makeshift refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. The camps are deplorably overcrowded and pose threats to human health and wellbeing. The

refugees need proper shelter, clothing, food, medicine, and other social infrastructure and support/services in the camps. The current level of international support and resources are totally inadequate. To date, Canada has pledged USD 25 million to UNHCR's assistance, contributing to UN's appeal for USD 434 million before February 2018. Canada indeed can, and should, do more to deal with the crisis.

Canadians expect more from Bob Rae in this challenging mission to engage the crisis. First, Rae should engage countries like China, India, Japan and other regional/international partners to put pressure on the military and security forces in Myanmar. Secondly, if the Myanmar regime is unwilling to allow international investigation into the allegations of crimes against humanity, Rae should strongly recommend revocation of Aung San Suu Kyi's honorary Canadian citizenship. Third, he should work for more Canadian and international aid and support for the refugees in Bangladesh. Fourth, he should recommend the Canadian government to resettle Rohingya refugees in humanitarian grounds, in collaboration with the UNHCR multi-year plans for refugee resettlement.

Finally, in his final report, Bob Rae should recommend both short and long-term roadmaps for repatriation of the refugees in Myanmar with dignity and honour.

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