



## HOW TO START DIALOGUE ON CURRENT EVENTS

### **A MANUAL FOR STARTING A WORLD AFFAIRS PROGRAM**

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#### **WHAT IS IT?**

A world affairs discussion program is an interactive, meaningful way of volunteering in your local community. Properly running a world affairs program entails a serious commitment. Retired individuals are often happy to make a sustained commitment to activities of interest. Delivering a program on a sporadic basis will discourage regular participation and make it more difficult to follow key themes or enduring stories. Try to select a local retirement home with a large, diverse group of residents. Contact your province's retirement association (for example, [ORCA](#) in Ontario, or the [BCRCA](#) in British Columbia) for more information about retirement communities in your area.

#### **WHY DO IT?**

Many retirement home residents benefit from entertainment such as bingo and concerts. Much of this, however, requires merely passive engagement; indeed, there is a poverty of intellectually stimulating social programming. A world affairs program geared towards senior citizens taps into a demographic that has one of the highest voting rates, time to read, and the real-life experiences to make insightful contributions. Due to physical handicaps, many retirement home residents lack the ability to actively engage in political fora in the community. A world affairs program can fill this gap by helping seniors create new social bonds, become acquainted with the political opinions of their peers, and become more confident in expressing their views in front of an audience.

In addition to aiding retirement home residents, running a world affairs program develops a useful personal skill set. Oral presentation abilities, research skills, mediation facility - such as occasionally defusing testy confrontations between audience participants – and your sensitivity to the nuances of global affairs are all enhanced by engaging in this volunteer task.

More broadly, running a world affairs program is a powerful way of encouraging a better-informed citizenry. As noted by Andrew Cohen in *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World*, Canadians' interest in international affairs has waned over the past several decades. Not since 1988 have foreign policy issues played a major role in a federal election. This is not because global affairs have lost salience for Canada. Rather, major newspapers have shrunk their foreign bureaus, and civil society organizations like the Canadian International Council (formerly the Canadian Institute of International Affairs) have had difficulty attracting new members due to a mushrooming of competing social action organizations such as Greenpeace.

## **HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE PROGRAM**

Preparing three to five stories will require a minimum of three hours of research in order to provide thorough background information and insightful analysis. Delivering the program demands a clear voice, strong moderating skills, and the ability to use intelligent questions to coax comments and debate from an audience which, depending on the size of the retirement home, may be as large as fifty people.

In order to boost attendance and give residents the chance to anticipate the dialogue session, print off a set of colourful posters (**see sample**) and request that management display them during the days leading up to the presentation. Organize regular meetings – preferably every two weeks.

For personal preparation, clip newspaper articles on a weekly basis. Ideally, your sources should be drawn from across the political spectrum (don't rely on just *The Guardian*). Seek a mix of national and international stories, and always conclude the program with a "good news story". Often, these will be under-reported stories of new peace deals (e.g. southern Sudan in January 2005), public health successes or economic miracles. Read widely, and inject variety into the program by presenting reviews of international affairs titles and biographies of recently-deceased public figures of note.

## **HOW TO PRESENT**

Speak slowly and clearly; whether your group is small (10) or large (over 50), attempt to make eye contact with all of the participants. This will help shy participants feel included in the proceedings.

Always present a structured program, beginning the session by announcing which stories will be broached. Deliver four or five stories, capping the program at one hour. Allow time for audience questions and pose your own questions to the group; this is a key way of keeping the participants engaged. Never allow the

agenda to be *ad hoc*. This is an invitation for parochial discussions on the inadequacy of local garbage collection.

Come with questions and engage participants in discussion, but be prepared to do the bulk of the speaking. Many participants will be content to simply sit and learn, enjoying the interaction between the presenter and more assertive participants. Make sure that you present the issues introduced in an accessible way, for people with a variety of educational and professional backgrounds.

## **SAMPLE PRESENTATIONS**

The following example is a slimmed-down version of the points I highlighted during one presentation:

### **Topic #1: Hurricane Katrina consequences**

- may reduce levels of US foreign aid – may hamper new aid commitments agreed to at Gleneagles G8 Summit
- Social Security plan will be shelved
- Opened the topic to the group: what are your reactions to the tragedy?

#### **Questions:**

1. Does this story represent a failure of government or rather an illustration of the vulnerability of Western cities to the natural elements. Both?

### **Topic #2: UN Reform**

- follow-up to Millennium Summit
- Discussion of Oil for Food corruption scandal
- Security Council should be made more representative
- Terrorism – strongly condemning it in all its forms but failing to define it
- Creation of new Human Rights Council – will it be an improvement over the Human Rights Committee?
- UN Management – Secretary General does not have enough power over budget – U.S. wants to strengthen Office of Internal Oversight Services

#### **Questions:**

1. Many of you were young adults when the UN was founded. Assessing both its successes and failures on humanitarian and collective security fronts, what grade has the organization earned since its inception?
2. Has the Oil for Food scandal made you re-evaluate the effectiveness of Kofi Annan's leadership?

### Topic #3: Japanese Election

- historical background on Japan and recent political history
- tied story to previous discussion of Japanese demographic bomb
- issue of postal privatization – key test for reformability of other domestic sectors
- governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) boosted chances of electoral success by employing “assassins” – e.g. a celebrity chef - to challenge old guard MPs
- 296/480 seats - biggest haul for LDP since 1986
- 20/34 LDP rebels no longer in office
- revised GDP growth figures suggesting 3.3% in 2005

### Questions:

1. LDP has ruled Japan for all but 10 months since 1955. Can real reform happen without a change of party? Or must there be a switch of party such as America experienced in 1932 when it elected a Democratic government during a time of deep economic troubles?
2. What are your impressions of Japan’s economic performance during the last decade?

### USEFUL RESEARCH RESOURCES

- BBC World (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/>)
- *The Globe and Mail* (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/frontpage/>)
- *The National Post* (<http://www.nationalpost.com/>)
- Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com))
- *International Herald Tribune* (<http://www.iht.com/pages/index.php>)
- *Le Monde* (<http://www.lemonde.fr/>)
- *Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/?nav=globaltop>)
- *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/>)
- *The Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/>)