



A Human Future

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Naheed Nenshi became mayor of Calgary in October, 2010. Mayor Nenshi grew up in Calgary and holds degrees from the University of Calgary and Harvard where he was a fellow at the Kennedy School of Government. He has lived and worked in cities around the world. He has been a trusted advisor to non-profits and major corporations, has designed Alberta government policy, has worked with the United Nations on how global business can help the world's poorest people, and has written significantly on cities.

Community-Building on an Urban Scale An Interview with Mayor Naheed Nenshi of Calgary

Mayor Naheed Nenshi is a passionate Calgarian, an academic, an accomplished business professional, and a man with a strong social conscience and community values. He has a reputation for thinking outside the box and he is seemingly tireless in his support of community initiatives. We asked, what can we learn from this man who has a passion for building community in his city. — *Beth Porter, ed.*

Beth Porter: You are a very popular mayor. What do you think are the key elements in that popularity?

Naheed Nenshi: It remains to be seen if the popularity is lasting at the next election! As to key elements, I am an educator, and I tend to explain things, go into detail. It seems citizens are ready for that, that people are tired of sound-bite politics and everything being boiled down to the lowest common denominator—you're with us or you're against us. They are ready for broader, more thoughtful discussions about the future of the community. That's what I try to provide and people seem to respond well. I'm not a career politician and perhaps I don't do things the way they are supposed to be done, but to me the role is really about being honest, open, listening as much as possible and ultimately making decisions that you invite people into. When decisions are controversial I hope people can at least say, 'I disagree with that decision but I appreciate why you made it.'

As politicians we have to shift our think-

ing about the people we serve, recognize that those people are the experts in their own lives, understand the impact on their lives, and bring them into the conversation so they feel a part of government, not alienated from it. For example, I and my colleagues may know about public transit—how to build networks, optimize fares, drive trains and buses—but the real expert is the person who takes the bus every day, because she knows how the system could be better. More broadly, we have to figure out ways to get people with more skin in the game. New technologies, different modes of communication—those are some ways to get people more involved.

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You started the “Do 3 things for Calgary” initiative that has that has been very successful. Where did the idea come from?

I have always been interested in two things: getting people more involved in their community, and the future of the city. My mayoralty is about those things. When I was running for mayor people were talking a lot about their community and its future. I wanted to see that civic engagement continue and grow, so right after the election, I pulled together some volunteers and asked them to come up with a plan that would make the city just as exciting between elections. They named themselves the Mayor’s Committee on Civic Engagement and they came back with the idea of doing “3 things for Calgary.” I’ve got to say that I thought it was simultaneously too simple and too complicated. Too simple because we’re not telling people what to do or how they could have the most impact. Too complicated because we’re asking people to do not one but three things—and actually a fourth thing, because when you finish you have to talk about your 3 things and mentor others to do their own 3 things. But we have come to see that the two factors

On Making Democracy Real

“Social justice is interconnected with participatory democracy,” says Ben Carniol, Professor Emeritus at Ryerson University, Program Coordinator for its Aboriginal Social Work Program, and long active in volunteer grassroots social justice initiatives, networks and forums.



He writes, “In Canada, we follow the model of representative democracy. While this is a significant step to full democracy, this model produces an ominous gap between elected officials and the people they represent. Typically, this gap is filled by pressure groups from the most privileged sectors, which tilts public policy in their favour. We could learn from municipalities within countries such as Brazil, which are recognizing the deficiency of this model and implementing more participatory forms of democracy. The results have been impressive as local communities not only engage in consultative processes, but also share power with elected officials about allocation priorities, and at times, how these priorities are carried out. These forms of participatory democracy should be applied in Canada at all levels of government.

(from “Rebuilding Social Programs,” in *Perception*, Vol 28, No 1&2, 2005. Published by the Canadian Council on Social Development. p. 26.)

The “3 Things for Calgary” initiative

3 Things for Calgary asks all Calgarians to

1. Think about 3 Things you can do to make Calgary better. These things could be for your street, your neighbourhood or for the entire city.
2. Do those 3 Things.
3. Encourage 3 more people to do the same.

“If every Calgarian did at least 3 Things for Calgary, we’d have more than 3 million actions making Calgary an even better city. Amazing! The 3 Things you choose are up to you. Large or small, every action we take makes a difference.

Learn more about **our initiative** and **what inspired us to launch it**, find **things that make you stop and think** and see an **inspirational list** to which you can add your 3 Things: www.3thingsforcalgary.ca”



Volunteering with the Alberta Animal Rescue Crew Society—one of the 3 things these folks chose to do.

This family wrote out their 3 things at the Children’s Festival:

- 1) Keep the bus clean
- 2) Recycle more
- 3) Use less water





I was unhappy with are actually the key success factors—first, because we are not telling people what to do people have more ownership and they have been endlessly innovative. And my second objection, that they had to do 3 things, turned out to be about creating a lifetime habit of community service. No one has stopped at 3 things!

You are an Ismaili Muslim. Are there ways in which you draw from your faith background in your role as mayor?

Talking often with people of faith and communities of faith has been one of the surprising and gratifying parts of my job—the Jewish community, different Christian communities, and so on. As people of faith, we have much more that unites us than divides us—the ethics and values by which we live, things like stewardship of our environment, the absolute moral requirement of community service, the dignity of every human being—these help us a lot in community-building, and certainly these have always been part of my own faith background. They continue to be important to me in this role. The Ismaili community has no paid clergy, for example. Everything is driven by volunteers and the ethics has always been, no matter how little you have, there is someone else who has less. Giving back to the community must be part of your everyday life.

You are incredibly busy in your role. How do you maintain personal balance or find time for stock-taking and reflection?

It is particularly tough in this job. I've always been someone who works hard and doesn't know when to go home. What is different is how relentlessly public this role is. It's not just having 12 or 14 or 16 hour days, it's being always 'on' during these long days, always representing the community. Every trip to the store becomes a town hall meeting on some issue. In terms of finding balance, two things: one, it's important to live in the moment and understand that the opportunities I have are a gift. So rather than think, "Oh my gosh, I've got 12 meetings today and I have to give 4 speeches," to think, "that's 12 opportunities to make positive change for somebody, and 4 opportunities to talk about the city and inspire people to do more." And sometimes I get to do really fun stuff. Not everyone gets to be in the Nutcracker at Christmas time! The other is to keep perspective. It's actually cool that 8-year-olds know who the mayor is and are happy to walk up to the mayor in the supermarket and talk about the lack of skateboarding facilities in the community. It gives me the opportunity to interact with people from every background and learn about their lives and how this community works. It helps that my personal and social life has always revolved around

Supporting Community-Building Activities

The **Run for L'Arche** is one of the many community-building activities that accord with Mayor Nenshi's Jane Jacobs-inspired ideas about livable cities. The mayor was the Official Race Starter for this year's race, a special one because 2013 is L'Arche Calgary's 40th anniversary of building community in Calgary.

[Click here to see L'Arche Calgary's Facebook page.](#)

Mayor Nenshi with representatives from L'Arche, Rogers Insurance and Economical Insurance. (This annual event, an important fundraiser for L'Arche Calgary, is sponsored by these insurance companies)





the amazing arts community here in Calgary and I still get to go to all those plays and performances. I may be in a different role, but once the lights go down I still get to experience the performance.

Reflection? Stock-taking? Reading? It's hard to do that during the day in my world, but the beginning and the end of the day are times where I have the opportunity to stop and think about where we're going. That is without question the most challenging part of my role. It's not unlike advice I have given to non-profits in my previous life: In measuring success, be careful not to get side-tracked by simple inputs and outputs. Ask yourself every day, How does the activity that I am doing today lead to the desired long-term outcome? The important thing is to remember that this has to be a longer-term thing, that we're building this city not for this week but for the next century. ■

For Your Information

On Calgary and its Mayor

- Naheed Nenshi is the lead author of *Building Up: Making Canada's Cities Engines of Growth and Magnets of Development*: [click here to read more](#)
- Mayor of Calgary: [Click around this site and be inspired!](#)
- [Calgary's "Transforming Government" agenda](#)
- [Imagine Calgary](#) reflects the mayor's vision for Calgary

On Civic Engagement

- [Canada25 Report on Civic Engagement](#)
- [Youth and Civic Engagement](#)

Ben Carniol: What motivates and sustains engaged citizenship?

"For me, maintaining a spiritual focus has been the key. Within various faith communities, there are individuals who tap into their spirituality to challenge unjust practices. Fortunately, I have found such people within my own Jewish community—courageous people willing to speak out for social justice. I'm trying to do the same..."

"What inspires me is my intuitive sense that human life is precious, sacred gift—a gift that is violated by processes of oppression and privilege.... Our individual capacity to take risks for social justice is nourished by our inner power—our ability to pierce through our own layers of apathy and cynicism—to hear that small inner voice, calling us to action rooted in caring about others. ... We may meet an inner adversary: cowardice, propped up by a web of clever excuses. That is why we need to connect with our intuitive spiritual strength [and] we also need to anchor our ego to the wisdom that informs our humility so that we respect legitimate differences while acting on our universal humanity." [In all this we need to ally ourselves] with the action of other [like-minded] people...."

(extracted from an interview about *Case Critical: Social Services and Social Justice in Canada*, 4th edition, and from *Case Critical*, 6th edition, Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2010, pp. 162–63) [Click here to read more.](#)

- [Jane Jacobs's contribution](#)
- [An Ismaili Muslim website](#)

On Community Building

- [Creating Sustainable communities — an online resource](#)
- [Eleven Principles for Creating Great Community Space](#) (This is part the great website "Project for Public Spaces.")
- Community-building wisdom from Jean Vanier's classic book, [Community and Growth](#)

www.larche.ca/en/inspiration



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

A Human Future is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.