

**Power to the People:  
The Legal Studies Program Pamphlet Collection, 1976-1995**  
Kirsten Wurmman & Diane Rhyason

Where has the Canadian public turned in the past, for information about such diverse legal topics as *Decision Making for Farm Families*, *Police Powers and Youth Rights*, or getting *Tips on Buying a Van*? What about *Adult Adoptees: Searching for Roots*, *Funeral Etiquette*, or a Vietnamese translation of *The Landlord & Tenant Act*? One of the simplest and enduring sources has been the pamphlet, produced by a wide variety of organizations that provide information to the public.

An historical collection of such pamphlets, consisting of almost 6,000 eclectic titles has recently made its way into the University of Alberta Archives from the Legal Studies Program at the Faculty of Extension. Now librarians, researchers and legal professionals can access this treasure trough of materials, which gives us a unique and historical perspective on the realm of public legal education (PLE<sup>1</sup>). Specifically, the collection reflects how legal information has been presented verbally and visually in the period from the early 1970s to 1995.

As a department of the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta, the Legal Studies Program (LSP) has a mandate to plan and develop educational opportunities for the public in the area of continuing law-related education and information. From the mid-seventies until the late nineties LSP, formerly the Legal Resource Centre (LRC), ran a resource library that included a large pamphlet collection. The library served as an unofficial depository for Canadian public legal education publications, as well as the official depository for all publications funded by the Alberta Law Foundation.

When the Canadian Law Information Council (CLIC) closed in 1991, the LRC library, with some funding by Justice Canada, also became the repository for the CLIC resources. This included a significant pamphlet collection, which was integrated into the original collection at the LRC. It is this integrated collection that has been arranged and made accessible as one complete and valuable glimpse into the dynamic history of public legal education.

## **BACKGROUND**

Public legal education arose from the social reform movement of the sixties that called for the direct participation of the public into law and justice matters. In the late 1960s and early 70s, Canadian agencies “responded to the legal information needs of activists, protesters, drop-outs and the otherwise disenchanting who saw that the law was affecting their lives in a direct way.”<sup>2</sup> The law could only reflect those expressed needs of the public however, if the public was knowledgeable about legal matters and the rule of law. It was determined therefore that broad systems of public legal education needed to be developed in order to ensure that society gained an increased knowledge and competency in the areas of the law as it related to their lives. According to the pioneers of this social reform, it is through PLE that “participatory democracy” and true access to justice could be attained.<sup>3</sup>

The goal of the blossoming PLE programs was to provide information about the law, teach people how to access resources, as well as train and encourage them to be involved in law-related activities. One key method in reaching the public was through the use of plain language in legal resource materials such as pamphlets and posters.<sup>4</sup> Plain

language in written legal materials was and still is, seen as a useful tool for creating more open lines of communication between the public and the legal system. In the 1980s, CLIC released what they called the “plain language project,” where they advocated the use of plain language in legal documents and administrative forms. This project was important at the time because it revealed that 90% of Canadians felt insecure about their knowledge of the Canadian legal system, and that over 40% of Canadians had a hard time reading, and understanding legal and official documents.<sup>5</sup> Plain language materials like pamphlets and posters therefore became crucial tools in the goal of PLE to educate and empower the public to use the law for social justice.

## **ORIGIN OF THE COLLECTION**

The pamphlets of the Legal Studies Program Pamphlet Collection originate primarily from other publishers. The pamphlets come from federal, provincial and municipal bodies as well as a variety of agencies, including The John Howard Society, and The Elizabeth Fry Society. Examples in this collection originate from every Canadian province and territory. There are several examples from American sources as well.

## **SCOPE**

The collection encompasses a wide scope of material and information in French and English, and is divided up into a number of broader categories, including Criminal Law, Family Law, Immigration Law, Legal Process, Motor Vehicle Law, Native Rights, and Tax Law. Further diverse topics are found within each subject category. It remains

of interest **what** legal topics were presented to the public, **how** these topics were presented, and also to what **extent** these topics changed over the years. For instance, pamphlets dealing with rape and sexual assault are numerous in this collection, and offer an evolving perspective on the subject. One can trace how and when PLE pamphlets began dealing with ‘newer’ issues like elder abuse, or sexual assault of physically challenged persons. It is also interesting to note when pamphlets dealing with sexual assault, for example, started to become available in an assortment of languages. The pamphlets not only cover a broad legal subject matter, but also are available in an impressive variety of over 20 languages, including Arabic, Chinese, German, Inuktitut, Punjabi, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

## **UNIQUENESS**

This pamphlet collection showcases the evolution of public legal education over 25 years, and reveals the ways in which the law has been presented to the public. The uniqueness of the LSP collection lies in this evolutionary process of the presentation of the law to the public. Researchers studying the progression or shifts in attitudes and approaches towards public legal education will find this collection very valuable. The variety of regional depictions, as well as the broad scope of translations available will also be of unique interest to researchers. The exceptional quality of this collection is apparent, as there is no other such collection of its kind existing in Canada.

## **CONCLUSION**

The conviction of public legal education to empower the people has relied heavily

on the ability to educate and inform. To those ends, an effective and common source of access to and understanding of the law for the public has been the pamphlet. The almost 6,000 pamphlets that now comprise the Legal Studies Pamphlet Collection present a unique and historical picture of how PLE has evolved within our Canadian legal environment. Housed at the University of Alberta Archives, the pamphlets remain accessible and available to the public for whom they were created.

*Diane Rhyason (Diane.Rhyason@ualberta.ca) is the Associate Director of the Legal Studies Program at the University of Alberta*  
*Kirsten Wurmman (kwurmman@ualberta.ca) is the Librarian for the LSP.*

*For more information about the collection, please contact:*

*Legal Studies Program*  
*Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta*  
*4-36, 8303-112 Street, 174 University Campus NW*  
*Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2T4*  
*(780) 492-1855*  
[\*lsp@ualberta.ca\*](mailto:lsp@ualberta.ca)

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Lois Gander writes that “the terminology surrounding PLE tends to be confusing. In some jurisdictions Public Legal Education is referred to as Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI), in others as Public Legal Information (PLI), and still others as Community Legal Education (CLE) or Community Legal Information (CLI). The term Law-Related Education (LRE) is used by some, but not everyone, to distinguish public legal education that is carried on in the schools from that which is directed to adult audiences. The reasons for these distinctions in terminology are largely historical and often have to do with fitting programs within the mandates of particular agencies, especially funders” (from “The Changing Face of Public Legal Education in Canada,” in *Canadian Forum on Civil Justice* 6 (2003), 4-9, p.4).

<sup>2</sup> Lois E. Gander, “The Changing Face of Public Legal Education in Canada,” *Canadian Forum on Civil Justice* 6 (2003), 4-9, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Lois E. Gander, “The Radical Promise of Public Legal Education in Canada” (master’s thesis, University of Alberta, 1999), p.9.

<sup>4</sup> Gander (1999), p.10.

<sup>5</sup> “Plain Language Project Undertaken by CLIC,” *Resource News* 12:5 (1988), p.10.

<http://www.cla.ca/members/feliciter/v50n2/feliciter-50-2-feature8.pdf>