



Lena Dominelli (United Kingdom), President 1996 - 2004

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"One person with passion is better than forty people merely interested."

— E. M. Forster

Professor Lena Dominelli is one of those people whose passion for social justice has made a significant difference to the lives of many people and to her profession, social work. If you have ever spent time with her, as I have done, you will know that she simply never stops. She has ideas for what must be done immediately to address current injustices and also proposes strategies for the long term. She takes action on the basis of her ideas, bringing in whoever might be able to help at a given moment on a particular issue. She draws you in with her unwavering optimism and her practical solutions and before long you find yourself in the midst of accomplishing what appeared to be impossible. A social worker par excellence.



Lena did not prepare for a career in social work. She began her studies at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada as a student that moved from the natural sciences to Sociology and English in a period of great social upheavals during the late 1960's. It was a time when students continually questioned those whose authority stemmed from their formal positions of power. In fact, Simon Fraser University, founded in 1965, was the hub of student activism in Western Canada. Through demonstrations, occupations and sit-ins, students effectively pressured for major changes including interdisciplinary studies and one the country's first institutional daycare centres (Johnston 2005) Lena was at the forefront of campus politics and learned valued lessons for her later career as an activist. The issues of the time: peace, poverty, women's rights, environmental degradation and active, participatory, noisy democracy are powerful concerns that have continued to shape her work.

That Lena attended university at all was an achievement, the first member of her family to do so. The eldest of 6 children in an Italian Canadian family, she was part of a larger extended family that had emigrated from Italy to Australia, Canada, and the USA. She grew up in what was then the wilderness of British Columbia outside the small community of Penticton on the Kettle Valley Line in a settlement of 4 houses and a bunkhouse for the railroad workers. Her father's work on the railroad regularly took him away from the family and, as the eldest, Lena was expected to take on many of the responsibilities of maintaining a household, at the time without electricity, central heating, indoor toilets or running water. When Lena speaks to me about her early years, I sense the enormous responsibility and affection that she felt then and continues to feel for her family members. And for expectations of herself to shoulder hard work, well beyond what others demand of themselves.

I also sense the ongoing feelings of being an outsider that she first experienced as a young person. While Italian people have a lengthy history in Canada including significant roles as early explorers and missionaries, their arrival in the large waves of immigrants from Europe after both World Wars was greeted by Canadians with spoken ambivalence, even hostility. Ironically most of these same Canadians were themselves earlier immigrants to Canada from Britain and France. It was not uncommon when Lena was a young girl to hear Italian Canadians referred to as “wops” (without papers), a term that connoted a racial, cultural and class slur. Given their wide acceptance in present Canadian society it is difficult to remember times earlier when Italian people were considered to be enemies or at least significantly different. Forgotten is the fact that in 1940 when Canada entered the Second World War several hundred people of Italian origin were arrested and interned as enemy aliens. And that Italian woman in Canada and other western countries contended with further prejudice:

“Cast as submissive beings, trapped in traditions, and denied access to the language and culture of the new world, they were characterized by stereotypical preconceptions of the immigrant, set against the backdrop of an Anglophone world. This stereotypical view became projected onto subsequent generations-giving rise to the “typical Italian woman”, a stock character of sorts with exaggerated, traditional mannerisms and antiquated beliefs. For second generation Italian-Canadian women seeking to gain meaningful ownership or partnership in Canadian society, this typecast has served to marginalize them both by gender and culture.” (Pieuo 1997, p.1)

Lena’s next decisions illustrate her unwillingness to be daunted by the social conventions and prejudices of the times. She enrolled in graduate studies at the University of Sussex obtaining a Masters of Arts degree in 1969 and then pursued research and teaching in Algeria for a year. With work on her doctoral studies almost completed in the next few years, she began a job in London, working as an industrial relations officer with specific responsibility for trade union recognition, workers’ self-management and equal pay. She launched herself on her social work career in Batley as a community development worker. Lena had the opportunity to put her deep commitment to community work into practice, to demonstrate how community members could begin to take charge of their own matters and how social workers could assist in this process. This conviction, sharpened by her on- the-ground experience, has been reflected in her thinking and writing ever since. In the midst of this challenge she completed her doctoral studies at the University of Sussex in 1979.

With her education and practical experience, it was not surprising that Lena quickly found employment in post secondary education in social work. She obtained a post as a Lecturer in Community Work in the Department of Applied Social Studies at the University of Warwick (1976-1990) where she became head of the MA/CQSW Course from 1981-1990. Changes in the field of community work compelled Lena to teach mainstream social services work and probation. Lena felt strongly that if she was to remain in the field of social work she should be duly qualified, completing her Certificate of Qualification in Social Work and Diploma in Applied Social Studies from Leeds University in 1981. She became a full professor and Chair of Social Administration and Director of Social Work in the Department of Sociological Studies at Sheffield University (1990-1996).

I first met Lena in 1988 in Vienna where the 3 major international social work organizations, IASSW, IFSW and ICSW, held an international congress. For both of us, it was an early experience in international social work organizations. It was quickly apparent that the conference organizers had made little provisions for the representation of marginalised

groups, particularly women and black and minority ethnic groups and caucus activities. Lena did not hesitate to bring this to the attention of the President of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). It was vintage Lena: rising in a crowded formal auditorium, 6 months pregnant and feeling uncomfortable in the August heat, to read the list of “demands” that our self styled women’s caucus had formulated, after late nights spent drafting and re-drafting the list. She was unfazed even energized by the audacity of the presentation. Amongst the demands was that women be represented equally on the Board of IASSW, then clearly dominated by men and that there be a standing women’s caucus in it (Dominelli 1998).

Lena herself became the Chair of the newly formed Women’s Caucus of IASSW from 1988-1992, the Vice-President from 1992-1996 and the President of IASSW, 1996-2004. Her commitment to that organization was unflinching but she always viewed it as an organization that must reflect in action the kind of values it espoused and that it must use its power and potential influence on behalf of those who had little. During her tenure, IASSW moved from being financially bankrupt to having a surplus that could be used in developing projects to promote social justice and curriculum development through social work; developed a closer collaboration with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) resulting in a joint international definition of social work, ethics document and global qualifying standards. She also worked with the United Nations to increase the voice of social work internationally.

Lena has written extensively and has contributed significant scholarship to her profession of social work. She is always ahead of the wave. Her first book, *Community Action and Organising Marginalised Groups*, published in 1982, set in place the social work method that she has always favoured but one that is often ignored. She wrote further volumes on anti-racist social work (1988, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2008), feminist thinking (1989, 1990, 1991, 2002) and critical social work (2002, 2004 and 2005). She was one of the first contemporary social work scholars to bring attention to the intersections of oppressions (‘Race’ and Gender in Social Work, 1991) and to explore the economic and social impact of globalization and neo-liberal thinking (‘The Taylorization of Intellectual Labour’, 1996; ‘Neo-Liberalism, Social Exclusion and Welfare Clients in a Global Economy’, 1999).

Lena is a prodigious scholar. She writes or thinks about writing all the time. She works out intellectual problems in ongoing conversations and tests her ideas on the ground with those in the thick of the issue. She actually writes a lot like she speaks: directly, with her own point of view squarely stated and with many examples from social work practice and policy to illustrate her position on a particular issue or theoretical construct. Contemporary writers are sometimes hesitant to write directly on issues of oppression, fearing that they will appropriate the voice of others who have more lived experience and who have the authority to speak on a particular issue. Lena has found her own way through this conundrum. She is committed to meeting with those who feel outside the mainstream and connecting their thinking to her own early experience. She writes as if her audience is not only social work students, practitioners or other scholars but also those in power who should know and care about social problems, much like she acted on the occasion of our first meeting. Speaking truth to power is one of her enormous strengths in practice and in her own scholarship. She is generous about sharing her writing expertise with others, partnering frequently with those who do not view themselves as writers helping them to find their voice and publish their work.

Lena’s work also reflects her ongoing commitment to learn from those whose experiences differ from her own. In conversation and public presentations, she often repeats what students

and practitioners tell her about their lives in countries that may be experiencing war, famine and violence, situations that trouble her greatly because they reflect such overwhelming need and injustices. Through her many group affiliations and connections with policy makers, she bears witness to the hardships of others. When the tsunami hit Southeast Asia in 2002, Lena was able to hear about the devastation from social workers on the ground. She mobilized action teams in Canada to talk about providing practical assistance to those whose homes and possessions were lost and to assist social workers struggling in communities affected by the tragedy to develop a long term response.

Lena has a consistent belief that students can achieve what they set out to accomplish in spite of the obstacles in their way. She prods and pushes and simply never gives up on students who may be tempted to give up on themselves without her encouragement. She values their ideas and insights. She is constantly finding ways for others to publish their work; through chapters in her books or connections that she has with various publishers. She is a generous colleague.

One of her most significant contributions has been made through her efforts to develop a strong, coherent and inclusive international profession of social work. Her early experiences in Algeria shaped her commitment to move well outside the comfortable pew that she could have occupied as an academic in a secure university post. She deeply believes that social work is an essential professional activity in all nations precisely because of its commitments to community organizing, human well-being for all and a value base that reflects hope through human relationships. She never apologizes for social work, although she is clearly aware of its limitations and of its colonizing potential. She has faith in its ability to critically examine its failings and she pushes it to do so move towards developing human potential and capacities in their rich diversities.

I spent a great deal of time working with Lena on an exchange project amongst social work students, staff and faculty members in 3 European countries and Canada. Language, university regulations, the vagaries of funding agencies, the lack of a history of working together and the sheer distance were daunting challenges. But what faculty, staff and students learned from such an experience was a fundamental truth that Lena has constantly espoused: social workers while deeply influenced by their historical, political and social contexts, share in a fundamental quest for social justice and that understanding the meaning of social justice is best grappled with by reflecting on its meaning for others. Even without a word of Swedish, we quickly understood what the workers in a community centre were trying to accomplish as they coped with the rapid influx of migrants in a country with a largely homogenous and not necessarily welcoming population. We raised questions about building cultural ghettos based upon our own experiences in the U.K. and Canada while they challenged us about the rights of immigrants to retain their own language and cultural in the midst of an unwelcoming one. We visited camps for unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands, where parents largely from sub-African countries and fearful of the possible fate of their children during civil war had found ways to move their children into countries that would offer them a future. We were struck by the sheer magnitude of the task for such a small country as the Netherlands and learned about its long history of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Our own child welfare services in Canada and the U.K. while stretched, had no such history of offering refuge on such a massive scale.

Exporting the wisdom of western cultures has never been Lena's vision of international social work. How dominant cultures can work differently on the basis of the experience and wisdom

of others in cultures far removed from their own is at the core of her thinking. Three books in which Lena contributed a great deal of thinking emerged from this experience and explore these core ideas about imperialism, liberal guilt and social justice: *Community Approaches to Child Welfare: International Perspectives* (edited by Lena); *Valuing the field: Child welfare in international context* edited by myself and Sven Hessle; and *Broadening horizons: International exchanges in social work* (edited by Lena with Wanda Thomas Bernard). Another book, *Revitalising communities in a globalising world* (edited by Lena) drew upon and was inspired by this experience.

Lena is presently a Professor of Applied Social Sciences and Head of Social, Community and Youth Work at the University of Durham. From 1996 to 2006 she was the Director of the Centre for International Social and Community Development at the University of Southampton. She is the United Nations Liaison Officer for IASSW, 2005 to the present. Lena's achievements have been honoured in several ways. In 2002 she received the Medal of Honour from the French Senate Committee for Social Affairs for outstanding contribution to international social work theory and practice; in 2003, John F Roach Plaque in recognition of outstanding work on the theory and practice of improving the citizenship status of deprived communities; in 2004, the Kuwaiti Association of Social Workers Plaque in recognition of outstanding contribution to bringing social work practitioners and educators together in the international arena; and, in 2007, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa for her contributions to international social work.

These awards have great meaning to her but rather than encouraging her to "rest on these laurels" they seem to inspire her to keep working, to demonstrate that much more needs to be done. There is an indefatigable quality to Lena spurred on by her unwavering passion for social justice and her belief that social work has much to offer in its pursuit. She is indeed what E.M. Forster had in mind when he penned the opening quotation to this article.

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