

Liberal government urged to be more aggressive in tackling poverty ^[1]

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A coalition of social policy advocates is urging the Liberal government to be more aggressive in tackling poverty, releasing a detailed report Tuesday with specific actions they hope to see in the 2018 budget and the promised national poverty reduction strategy that will follow.

Campaign 2000 was formed in the early 1990s to urge governments to deliver on an all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty by the turn of the millennium. Nearly three decades later, the coalition says there are still 1.2 million children and families in poverty.

But the campaign's national director, Anita Khanna, is optimistic that there is a rare window of opportunity for government action on some of the suggestions advocates have long called for.

"We welcome the federal government's attention to poverty issues and we've called for a poverty reduction strategy for Canada for decades, really, and this is the first time a government had made a commitment and is developing one," she said. "We want to make sure that there's a follow-through with a substantial policy change that could really make a big difference."

The first test of that optimism will come Wednesday, when Jean-Yves Duclos, the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, will release the government's National Housing Strategy. The minister has said the housing strategy, which will include new measures related to social and affordable housing, is considered to be a key element of the Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy, for which he is also responsible for and will release after the 2018 budget.

The most recent international rankings of 41 developed nations shows Canada lags behind its peers in several areas related to poverty reduction. The UNICEF report placed Canada near the bottom in terms of global goals to end poverty in all its forms and ending hunger.

Statistics Canada's latest census data revealed that 1.2 million Canadian children lived in a low-income household in 2015, representing 17 per cent of all children. Statistics Canada uses the after-tax low-income measure, which in 2015 was \$22,133 for one-person households and \$44,266 for a four-member household.

The five cities with the highest rates of children living in low-income households were Windsor, Ont., Saint John, London, Winnipeg and St. Catharines-Niagara, Ont.

The Liberal government won praise from anti-poverty advocates in October when the fall fiscal update announced that the Canada Child Benefit would be indexed to inflation earlier than previously planned.

The government overhauled federal child benefit programs in 2016 to create the new payment, which is geared to income and given to families based on the number of children they have and how old they are.

Bank of Canada Governor Stephen Poloz said in October that the introduction of the benefit had a "pretty significant" impact on Canadian economic growth, in part by allowing some stay-at-home parents to return to the workforce because they could afford day care.

The Liberal government's fall update said economic growth is expected to come in at 3.1 per cent for 2017, up from the expected 2 per cent growth that was projected in the March budget.

Campaign 2000 points to Mr. Poloz's comments when asked how Ottawa might pay for the extensive list of policy recommendations. The report suggests some Canadians may have to pay higher taxes and the coalition supports the government's small business tax reforms aimed at high-income Canadians.

Campaign 2000 is a coalition of 120 national, provincial and community organizations, including public and private sector unions, religious groups and organizations representing social workers and food banks.

An advance copy of the report was provided to the Globe and Mail.

In terms of specific recommendations for a national poverty reduction strategy, Tuesday's report touches on a wide range of areas. It calls for a further enhancement of the Canada Child Benefit; an early childhood education and care program; increased social transfers to the provinces; an increase in the Working Income Tax Benefit; a specific focus on eradicating poverty in Indigenous communities; increased Employment Insurance benefits; implementing a federal minimum wage of \$15 an hour and increasing the EI sickness benefit to 26 weeks from the current 15 to address the fact that fewer workers have workplace disability plans.

Parliamentary Budget Officer Jean-Denis Fréchette is scheduled to release a report Tuesday analyzing the impact of various federal programs for low-income individuals and families.

Ms. Khanna said the Liberal moves on the child benefit have been positive, but the report shows there is much more that Ottawa could be doing to address poverty issues.

"There's been some really good down payments in terms of the CCB, which is a very monumental policy, as well as the indexation," she said. "But that's not a stopping point. I hope we accelerate."

-reprinted from The Globe and Mail

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