

Editorial: Poor strategy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The federal government's anti-poverty strategy announced Tuesday has already become a punch line.

Question: "With no new money and no new programs, how is the strategy expected to work?"

Answer: "By lowering the poverty line!"

That assessment is unfair as the 115-page document is the product of more than a year of public consultations and input from an advisory panel, which included Canadians living in poverty.

The strategy hopes to lift more than two million people above the poverty line, and reduce the rate of poverty by 50 per cent by 2030. Those targets would lower the poverty rate in Canada from about 12 per cent today to 10 per cent by 2020 and six per cent by 2030. But it will still leave 2.1 million people in poverty by the end of the time frame.

Ottawa terms it a bold plan, but it's largely a list of programs and policies the Liberals have enacted since coming to power in 2015, such as the Canada Child Benefit, increases to seniors' benefits, funding for child care and help for affordable housing. Those programs have already cost \$22 billion but it's not nearly enough to help millions of poor Canadians.

The federal strategy comes on the heels of recent provincial setbacks which had hoped to address poverty issues. The new Ontario government scrapped a basic income pilot project, suggesting the program discouraged participants from finding work. In P.E.I., an all-party motion to launch a basic income guarantee pilot collapsed when Ottawa refused to support it.

The strategy also establishes the "market basket measure" as the tool to determine an official poverty threshold. Ottawa plans to enshrine the strategy's goals and the poverty threshold into law. Using this measure, a family or person is considered to be living in poverty if they can't afford a basic shopping basket of goods and services. The measure is tailored for 50 individual communities to account for the difference in the cost of living between cities.

In Atlantic Canada, that poverty line ranges from \$36,549 in Saint John, N.B.; \$37,778 in Halifax; \$38,124 in Charlottetown; \$38,028 in St. John's; \$39,430 in urban Nova Scotia; to \$40,318 in other urban areas of Newfoundland and Labrador. Those poverty thresholds must leave a lot of Atlantic Canadians — who are getting by on far less — scratching their heads.

There will be accountability. The strategy calls for a new advisory body that will include people who have actually lived in poverty, to advise the minister and report to Parliament.

This strategy names a goal and sets a direction, but then works with current tools. It's an odd document.

The long-term success of the strategy depends on the willingness of future governments to stick with it. That's poor planning.

And, in the end, millions will still be mired in poverty.

The strategy is a good start, but fails too many Canadians.

Related link: Campaign 2000 responds to Canada's first Poverty Reduction Strategy ^[3]

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