

Editorial: Let's stand up to fight poverty ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In countries around the world [Oct. 17th], thousands of people will Stand Up to protest against global poverty as part of events to mark the 14th United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

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Fighting child poverty was once a national goal in Canada. Some 17 years ago, the House of Commons unanimously resolved to eliminate poverty among children by the year 2000. That lofty goal has never been met.

Six years after the 2000 deadline, one in six Canadian children lives in poverty, a rate more than three times as high as that in Sweden, Norway and Finland. And every month 770,000 Canadians rely on food banks, 40 per cent of them children. That is inexcusable in such a wealthy country.

To put the issue of poverty back on the political agenda as a national priority, a coalition of more than 700 groups in Canada with 250,000 members has launched the Make Poverty History campaign. It is seeking urgent, meaningful policy changes by both Ottawa and the provinces. Specifically, the coalition wants the federal child tax benefit raised and for provinces, including Ontario, to stop clawing back the child benefit supplement for poor families from those on social assistance.

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As a crucial first step, Ottawa should introduce an earned-income supplement for Canada's 650,000 working poor to help provide them with a decent standard of living. Without such a supplement, which would come in the form of a monthly cheque, it is hard for many Canadians to overcome the "welfare wall," a situation that occurs when it makes little economic sense to get a job because welfare provides more benefits.

Also, the federal government should study ways to raise the minimum threshold for taxes in a way that benefits only those earning the least amount of money. Currently, some single people earning \$9,000 a year are paying federal income taxes. As well, the Employment Insurance program must be reformed. In Ontario, fewer than one in four workers qualifies for EI benefits, pushing far too many of them into even greater poverty by forcing them onto social assistance when they lose a job.

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Tackling poverty must become a priority in this country and a major issue in the next federal and provincial elections. Voters should remember which politicians failed to Stand Up and be counted.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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