

A widening gap in our midst^[1]

Opinion

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Sep 2006

EXCERPTS

This is one in a series of commentaries the Star is running sparked by the story of Maheswary Puvaneswaran, one of 650,000 Canadians struggling to make ends meet.

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Taking our cue from the Star's recent series, we "ask why." Why is Canada stalled on progress toward fairness, equality and a social contract based on a hard day's work for a fair day's pay?

It is not for a lack of evidence about what to do. The Star notes in a recent editorial that report after report maps out the necessary tools for success. Ensure adequate minimum wages and strong, enforceable labour standards. Provide income supports to recognize the costs of raising children and to help those who cannot work full time. Build a social infrastructure that includes affordable housing and quality early learning and child care.

Ask why real progress is stalled. Because false imperatives too often steer public policy decisions. They take root as "givens." We hear "We'd like to, but cannot afford it." Or "the world has changed ... inequality is the inevitable price of economic growth." And even, "absolutely, but the responsibility lies with another level of government."

According to the logic of false imperatives, social investments are unaffordable because we must grapple with competing interests and the need for competitive tax structures. Low-income people must wait, it seems, and be satisfied with trickle-down policies that do not work.

But how can we afford to wait? The impending wave of retiring boomers is due to cause massive labour shortages. By the next decade, all net job growth in Canada will come from immigration. Yet the skills and experience of a vast pool of newcomers go untapped. Canada's young people, among the most highly educated in the industrialized world, are denied opportunities to establish a solid foothold in the labour market. Single mothers have their hopes dashed by the lack of child care and prospects for a good job. We seem incapable of harnessing the huge potential of people with disabilities.

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It's not as if the public purse has been empty. Billions have been available for public priorities. But tax cuts, including the recent \$4.5 billion GST cut, have monopolized priority setting. Billions more are locked away in unpaid EI surpluses, as the vast majority of the unemployed cannot qualify for benefits. Many wonder why Ontario's social infrastructure remains in tatters, even though little has been done to regain the fiscal capacity lost during a decade of deep tax cuts.

Another common refrain tells us that precarious work and low wages are the inevitable reality of global competition. But international evidence shows otherwise. The OECD counsels comprehensive social and labour market policies as a pathway to strong economies with productive labour forces. Scandinavian nations have successfully balanced supportive social policies and thriving, competitive economies.

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Another hurdle to progress is the obfuscation of jurisdictional responsibilities. Too much energy is expended by senior levels of government in buck-passing.

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Now is not only the time to ask why. We need to ask "when?" Talk doesn't help the working poor...Crumbs packaged in pre-election pamphlets won't help either. Real vision, informed by enlightened self-interest and resolve on the part of governments, employers and workers, will.

- Reprinted from the Toronto Star

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