

Public policy fuelling poverty ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 6 Sep 2006

EXCERPTS

Canadians see their public policies toward the provision of health care and social services and other supports to citizens to be responsive, fair and equitable. If there is poverty, we attribute it to individual failings rather than the shape of our public policies.

These views are misguided.

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A striking 52 per cent of children living within female-led families were so classified.

When poverty figures reach these levels, it is difficult to attribute personal failures as responsible for the fates of millions of our fellow citizens. In reality, Canadian public policy in a wide range of spheres — including poverty prevention — are undeveloped compared with most European nations.

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Changing international economic structures require profound adjustments to industrial and labour practices to ensure citizens do not experience deteriorating living standards and the health and social consequences associated with such a decline.

To guarantee against this, governments have the responsibility to invest in social infrastructure to ensure that citizens possess the cognitive and social skills required to adjust to changing educational and employment demands of a post-industrial society.

The primary target of such investments should be children, who are the most vulnerable.

The material and social deprivation associated with child poverty makes it the greatest threat to human development and a nation's quality of life. Establishing living wages, progressive taxation structures, and a national system of child care are primary means of achieving poverty alleviation.

Why does a wealthy nation such as Canada have 15 per cent of its children living in internationally defined poverty, while far less wealthy nations such as Denmark and Finland have fewer than 3 per cent of its children living under such conditions? The high numbers result from governmental decisions on how to distribute economic resources among Canadians.

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The advocacy group Campaign 2000 gathered political parties' responses to policy options to reduce child poverty that included higher child-tax benefits and minimum wages, increasing funding for social housing, and providing a national system of early learning and child care.

NDP positions were consistent with every policy option provided by Campaign 2000. The Conservative position was opposed. The Liberal party supported the early learning and child-care option and partially supports the social housing recommendation.

The Bloc Québécois position is generally supportive of these recommendations, but its focus on Quebec leads to negative positions on Pan-Canadian issues.

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This analysis highlights the importance of the political in the policy process. And, not surprisingly, analyses reveal that child poverty rates — an aggregate indicator of a cluster of policy approaches — is primarily determined by left influence in governmental policy-making.

At the national level, there is a striking relationship between left-party cabinet-share from 1946 to the 1990s and child poverty rates.

The welfare state institutions of medicare and public pensions were established during minority government rule in which the NDP held the balance of power. More recently, the strong budget impetus to child care, housing, and public transportation resulted from a similar minority party situation.

Poverty rates ebb and flow — within a very limited range — as a result of periods of economic growth and recession. The future of child poverty in Canada, and associated indicators of population health and quality of life, depends upon the policy influence of political parties in federal and provincial Parliaments. Conservative dominance may increase these rates.

In the longer term, the influence of political parties that support reducing poverty is enhanced by electoral reform.

International experience shows that poverty levels are lower and government commitments to supporting citizens stronger when proportional representation is implemented.

Policy-makers would do better to focus on public policies that create poverty rather than blaming the victims of these policies for their situations.

- reprinted from Toronto Star

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