

Callwood speaks but few listen [CA] ^[1]

Author: Goar, Carol

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EXCERPTS

There was a time, in her long battle against child poverty, when June Callwood thought about launching a class action suit against the Government of Canada. Surely it constituted child abuse, she reasoned, to leave more than 1 million youngsters in preventable poverty.

Her lawyer dismissed that idea as a "hilarious example of political theatre."

Now, at 81, Callwood is down to her last and best weapon: her own passionate voice.

"It's a moral decision whether our children really matter," she says. "I don't know how much longer the country can hold its self-respect together."

But no one seems to be listening.

Child poverty has barely surfaced in this election, despite the deadly violence welling up in Toronto's poor neighbourhoods, the alarming youth suicide rate on native reserves and wasted talent on the nation's streets.

As voting day neared, Callwood and three other children's activists held a news conference to appeal to Canadians to consult their consciences before casting their ballots.

Four journalists showed up, two from religious publications, one from Omni television and one from the Star.

The pile of press kits sat pathetically on a table. The child-care workers and church leaders who'd gathered for the event tried to hide their disappointment.

Callwood was magnificent. She delivered her message as if she'd been speaking to a crowd of hundreds.

But her reservoir of fresh tactics is empty. She's tried eloquence, anger, logic, humour and shame to move the nation's politicians. She's asked them to explain how countries such as Hungary and Poland - with rank 26th and 28th on the global wealth scale - can afford to treat their youngest citizens better than Canada. She's marched, pleaded, lobbied and built coalitions.

She leaves no doubt about what has to be done to cut child poverty:

- Workers need jobs that pay enough to support a family. At the moment, a third of the children living in poverty have at least one parent who is employed full-time.

- Families need affordable housing.

- Low-income parents need access to reliable child care. At the moment, only 15 per cent of the children of working parents can be accommodated in the regulated child-care system. Obviously, single mothers who are struggling to make ends meet are in no position to compete.

According to Campaign 2000, an umbrella group representing 90 children's organizations, only the New Democrats come close to meeting these criteria. It gives the Liberals a passing grade on child care and finds nothing to approve in the Conservative platform.

The Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada goes further, warning that a government headed by Stephen Harper would reverse 30 years of progress on early childhood education.

Callwood and Rabbi Arthur Bielfeld, who co-founded the Campaign against Child Poverty eight years ago, try to steer clear of partisan politics. Their goal is to sway public opinion.

But these are lean times, Bielfeld admits. "I believe in the decency of Canadian society, but I'm becoming increasingly restive. We are not responding to the despair around us. We're not the lovely people we think we are."

The fight against child poverty will go on, no matter what happens at the polls, he vows. But he longs for recruits of Callwood's resilience and strength of purpose.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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