

How your vote impacts on poverty rates [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Despite the House of Commons unanimously passing an all-party resolution on Nov. 24, 1989 to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000, Canada's child poverty rate continues to be among the highest in the developed world.

According to UNICEF, Canada's child poverty rate stood at 14.9 per cent during the late 1990s. This is the case even though Canada is wealthier - using the total value of goods and services produced or GDP - than just about every other developed nation.

Denmark's child poverty rate of 2.4 per cent represents a virtual elimination of child poverty. This is also the case in Finland, Sweden, Holland, Belgium and Norway. As a researcher trying to come to grips with why this might be the case, I reviewed Canadian public health documents that have accumulated since the famous 1974 Lalonde Report that put Canada on the world map as a leader in "health promotion."

The appreciation of the importance of poverty by public health professionals and civil servants at Health Canada is present. So why is nothing being done?

An increasing body of research finds that child poverty rates cannot be attributed to failings of those children and families who are poor.

It does not even lie with the presence or absence of well-meaning intentions of policymakers. It reflects the general operation of the economy - heavily influenced by the politics - of a nation.

International studies reveal the best predictors of child poverty rates are: The percentage of low-paid workers within a nation; minimum wage levels; and the percentage of national revenues invested in social infrastructure through services, programs, or other public spending.

Despite Canadians' beliefs about the generosity of our programs, we have one of the least developed welfare states.

Indeed, Canada is identified by scholars as a "liberal welfare state" that shares characteristics with nations such as the U.S., Britain, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand.

These nations spend relatively little on social and entitlement programs, which results in higher levels of child and general poverty, and greater income and wealth inequality.

How does a nation get to be a liberal welfare state as opposed to a nation that takes the well-being of its population seriously? The answer is deceptively simply.

The best predictor of child poverty rates is also the best predictor of official commitment to providing its citizens with a modicum of security and well-being: The influence of "left" parties in government as measured by "left cabinet share."

Left cabinet share is the percentage of cabinet members that are members of a labour or social democratic party.

How strong is the relationship between left cabinet share and child poverty rates? Among 14 developed nations between 1946 and 1990, the presence of left parties in government is strongly related to the probability that a child will experience poverty.

To illustrate: Sweden had a 32 per cent left cabinet share and a child poverty rate of 2.4 per cent. Belgium had a 13 per cent left cabinet share and a 6 per cent child poverty rate. Canada had 0 per cent left cabinet share and a 14 per cent rate.

Why is this so? Social democratic parties are committed to full employment, equitable distribution of income and wealth, and provision of a strong social safety net.

Even though Canada has never had a left party member in cabinet, the presence of left party members in Parliament during minority government situations has led to most of the progressive changes such as medicare and public pensions.

More recently, increased spending on housing, daycare, and public transportation came about in our current minority government situation because of the NDP. The electoral implications of these findings are clear.

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