

Canada is failing needy children [CA] ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

Poverty hurts. It can be especially hard on children. And there is no reason for child poverty in a country as rich as Canada, the United Nations Children's Fund reminds us in a new report that underlines the extent to which government policies that tolerate it are a form of child neglect.

Canada's record over the past 15 years is shameful.

Despite the all-party commitment made by Parliament in 1989 to "seek to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000," our child poverty rate has barely budged. It's down just 0.4 per cent.

Of the 26 rich countries that belong to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, we rank a miserable 19th. What does that mean? More than 1 million poor kids in Canada.

Although Canada still ranks just ahead of Britain, that country gained the most ground over the past decade. UNICEF reports Britain has already met its first target to wipe out child poverty by 2020 - achieving an impressive 25 per cent reduction since 1997, far better than us.

One reason for Britain's success is the 39 per cent increase in the average amount of money going to children in households that receive government transfers. In Canada, there was a decline of 12 per cent.

That Canada appears to be going in the opposite direction from Britain says a lot about the approaches the two countries have adopted.

Britain has taken three decisive steps in developing a plan to eradicate child poverty. Canada hasn't taken one.

The first thing Britain did was to assess the size of the problem by developing the statistical apparatus that's needed to measure how much child poverty actually exists. Then it set precise targets for reducing poverty.

And it developed income support policies to ensure targets were met.

By contrast, UNICEF singles out Canada for failing even to define or measure child poverty.

It says, "The all-party promise (to try to eliminate child poverty) made 15 years ago ... has run into the sands of definitional debate and has not been followed by agreed yardsticks and clear targets."

Having failed to define the problem, Ottawa is poorly placed to deal with it. Responding to UNICEF, Finance Minister Ralph Goodale merely listed the measures Ottawa has taken to help poor kids.

But has Ottawa made any real difference? The truth is, Goodale can't say.

And that proves UNICEF's point.

Canada is not doing enough for needy children. In a sense, we don't even want to know. And that is the greatest shame of all.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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