

Give social programs same attention as health reform: Romanow [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Now that the federal and provincial governments have agreed to a fix for medicare, it's time to rebuild Canada's other social programs, says Roy Romanow.

Romanow, who headed the 2001 royal commission on health care, said the \$41.2-billion investment in health agreed to by first ministers should not come at the expense of things like child care and affordable housing. Social funding to provinces has now been divided into two parts: the Canada Health Transfer and the Canada Social Transfer, and Romanow said it's time to re-examine the social side.

"That examination and debate is desperately needed now. The social transfer side of the equation is as much, in some ways even more important, to producing well being and healthy outcomes," he said Thursday in a speech to the Canadian Council on Social Development.

Romanow said the gap between rich and poor has been growing and threatens the well being of all Canadians.

"Due to the lack of good jobs that provide economic security, too many people are working at near-minimum wages and struggling to make ends.

"The increase in contract, temporary or part-time work means that there are too many individuals who no longer qualify for employment insurance or are only eligible for a short period of assistance due to tightened eligibility rules."

Welfare is the program of last resort for many, yet it is frequently not adequate to cover basic needs, he said.

"In Ontario, a lone-parent family with two children receives \$554 in shelter allowance and \$532 in basic needs allowance. But the average rent in Toronto for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,047 which means that in this case family left with a grand sum of \$39 for food, clothing and all other expenses.

"So, because of the cuts that have taken place too many people are forced to make that impossible choice, to put it starkly and somewhat dramatically I admit, between paying the rent or feeding the kids. Not acceptable in a country like ours."

The crisis in medicare has frequently been blamed on cuts that Ottawa imposed during the 1990s to the Canada Health and Social Transfer which provinces used to fund health, higher education and social programs.

But medicare was not the only area to get hit. Universities in most provinces raised tuition fees and many provinces cut welfare support, sometimes dramatically.

Romanow's comments reflect a growing concern that the battle over medicare has pushed other social concerns to the margins of the political agenda.

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