

The issue no one is talking about [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The most unpleasant sound to a politician is silence. Just ask Ed Broadbent. The former leader of the New Democratic Party left Parliament in 1989 to pursue a career as a teacher and lecturer. But as he traveled the country talking up his favorite theme - the lingering national disgrace of child poverty - Broadbent was shocked by the degree of apathy. No one paid attention, he says. So he decided to re-enter the political fray.

Broadbent, 67, is running for a parliamentary seat in the Ottawa Centre riding where he lives. At first, the media covered his candidacy as a classic comeback tale that spiced up what most assumed would be a predictable election. Now that the campaign has turned anything but predictable, media attention has drifted elsewhere. Both Broadbent and the issue that brought him back into the ring are slipping again from sight.

It was Broadbent who pricked the nation's conscience 15 years ago by reminding citizens that thousands of Canadian youngsters went hungry every night. The message struck a chord with a population that had prided itself on being a global model of fairness. In 1989, a year after the N.D.P. won 43 seats in its best-ever federal showing, Broadbent leveraged the party's clout in what was then a Tory-minority government to secure a resolution pledging to eliminate child poverty by 2000. At the time an estimated 1 in 6 Canadian children lived below the poverty line. Not only did the pledge go unfulfilled, but things have got worse. The number of people earning less than \$11,000 a year grew during the 1990s by 34%. About a million Canadians under the age of 18 are in dire need, according to Campaign 2000, a national antipoverty group.

So where's the outrage? Broadbent frets that in a closely fought election, politicians and the media are concentrating only on issues that affect a majority of their so-called target voters. That includes a range of issues from health care to air pollution, but evidently not poverty. Jack Layton, the current N.D.P. leader, briefly raised the issue of homelessness this year. But his clumsy effort to blame Prime Minister Paul Martin for homeless deaths on Toronto streets backfired. He frankly goofed, concedes a senior N.D.P. figure who wants to stay anonymous. Now the party is reluctant to get back into it.

And so the problem festers. True, much of the economic news is good: employment is at an all-time high, Bank of Canada economist Stefane Marion told the Globe and Mail last week, adding, "We believe the economy could actually return to its production potential before the end of 2005."

But too many Canadians aren't keeping up. According to Beryl Wajzman, president of Montreal's Institute for Public Affairs, a third of the nation's work force has less than two weeks salary in the bank. Canada, Wajzman says, has only a thin veneer of affluence.

Why aren't we talking about this? Here's one reason. While political leaders are scrambling to outbid one another with plans for spending the nearly \$3 billion surplus stored up over a tough decade of budget cuts, few seem willing to risk appealing to the better angels of our nature. In 1968 Pierre Trudeau won Canada's heart by promising a just society. The fearmongering that has come to dominate the campaign the Liberals began airing TV spots last week implying that Canadians were at risk from guns, pro-lifers and foreign wars suggests that party tacticians believe today's voters are interested only in getting through the night safely. Wajzman doesn't buy it. They're not giving the electorate enough due, he says. Social justice is the bread-and-butter issue of our time, but it takes political courage to bring this up.

Or maybe a minority Parliament. Which brings us back to Ed Broadbent. His principal opponent, former Martin strategist Richard Mahoney, is suffering amid an Ontario-wide swing against the Liberals. Broadbent claims he's picking up enough support from disaffected Tories and Liberals to win. If recent polls are correct, he will join a caucus significantly larger than the 13 N.D.P. seats won in 2000. His party once again could hold the balance of power in a minority government where issues like poverty may regain political traction. It wasn't what I planned on, he says. Maybe this time he can get more people to pay attention.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Tags: poverty^[2]

election^[3]

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