

Premiers should address children still living in poverty, coalition says [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Canadian Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Jul 2001

AVAILABILITY

Text below

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Instead of squawking about health care, provincial premiers should try to ameliorate the lives of Canadian children, one in five of whom still live in poverty, a national coalition for children said Tuesday.

On the eve of a premiers' meeting in Victoria, representatives from Campaign 2000 urged the heads of the country's 10 provinces and three territories to take a break from health care and equalization discussions to further a national children's agenda.

The issue of child welfare has too often become a jurisdictional battle between the provinces and the federal government, with the feds picking up most of the slack in recent years, said Michael Goldberg, director of the Social Planning and Research Council of B.C.

"We're asking the provinces to come to the table and put their money up as well," said Goldberg, who sits on the Campaign 2000 steering committee.

"We are looking for leadership from the premiers to keep the momentum going for children."

At last year's first ministers' meeting which included the prime minister, the provinces signed a \$2.2-billion agreement to establish over five years an Early Childhood Development Initiative using federal money.

That initiative was a start, but it did not go far enough, Goldberg said.

"That's a very small amount of money when you compare it to what is usually required to run a national program," he said.

Pedro Barata, a spokesman for Campaign 2000, accused provincial governments, including the Ontario Conservatives, of using portions of that federal money to pay for programs that were already running, and pocketing their own contributions.

The provincial Challenge Fund saw \$15 million of federal money going into the fund, he said.

"They pocketed \$15 million into general revenue and replaced it with federal dollars in what is already a flawed program," he said.

The coalition's national co-ordinator said last year's agreement was only a start.

"While we have witnessed some modest steps in children's policies, the job of seriously addressing child poverty is yet to be tackled," Laurel Rothman said in a release.

"Children's health and well-being depends on whether the premiers will agree to play a key role in shaping and funding successful programs for families."

The coalition stated more money needs to be devoted to:

Improved child benefits;

Canada-wide systems of universal high-quality early childhood education and care;

Investments in affordable housing and post-secondary education;

Commitments to a national commission to consider how to improve the availability of good jobs;

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