

Nation looks to premiers to lead fight against poverty [CA]^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Canada has been plunged into a worldwide recession that is harsher than any economic downturn since the Great Depression. Now, more than ever, citizens are counting on their governments for vision, compassion and leadership.

This week's premiers' talks create a vital opening to start now on an economic recovery plan that reduces poverty, prevents more Canadians from falling into poverty, and puts all of Canada's provincial economies back on a steady footing.

The recession hit Canada last October, and since then about 370,000 Canadians have been thrown out of work. But the federal employment insurance (EI) program isn't there for half (52 per cent) of the nation's unemployed.

The fallout from this recession is landing squarely on the premiers' shoulders. Without an adequate EI program, Canada's unemployed will be turning to social assistance, food banks, homeless shelters and other provincially funded programs. Provincial poverty rates are bound to soar - with dizzying speed in some regions.

For too long, there has been a leadership void at the federal level. We urge Canada's premiers to do everything it takes to bring the federal government to the table, and to act in a cooperative, coordinated way to address poverty before the situation gets worse.

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Four out of 10 children living in poverty have at least one parent working full time. Unfortunately, there are few income supports for that family when the parent loses a job or cannot find work.

In the 1980s and 1990s recessions, there were more and better supports. Employment insurance and provincial social assistance programs were available and accessible. Not so today. Nine months into recession, Canada is still not recession-ready. An immediate increase in social assistance rates and a relaxation of the rules on asset limits would help many families gain economic independence.

The burden will fall on Canada's premiers to deal with the aftermath. Some are implementing poverty reduction strategies in their province. Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, P.E.I., Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba - representing more than two-thirds of Canada's population - are planning or implementing poverty reduction strategies. This leadership is welcome but it is still not visionary enough to ensure Canada is positioned for a return to prosperity post-recession.

Most Canadians agree that the persistence of child and family poverty is unacceptable. An Environics poll reveals 90 per cent of Canadians say they would be proud if their premier took the lead in reducing poverty in their province; 88 per cent want Canada to be a leader in poverty reduction; and 77 per cent say a recession is all the more reason to act now.

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Poverty robs us of critical talent and denies young people the opportunity to succeed. As we approach Nov. 24 - which marks 20 years since the unanimous 1989 all-party resolution to end child poverty in Canada - nearly 680,000 children and their families live in poverty. That's 9.5 per cent of all children - about one out of every 10. And that was before this recession. As acknowledged in the Kelowna Accord, for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children the poverty rate is substantially higher. We can, and must, do better.

There are other, non-recessionary pressures on provinces and territories as well. The demographic shift is on our doorstep as baby boomers begin the biggest wave of retirement this nation will have ever experienced. Pressures on our future labour market in the context of a globally competitive post-recession environment means Canada needs every citizen to be at his or her working best. Persistent poverty acts as a barrier to future prosperity - it exacts punishing hardships on those who live it and it keeps Canada from realizing its full potential.

The cost of political inaction is steep. Recent analysis by the Ontario Association of Food Banks estimates the cost of poverty at \$38 billion a year. Repeating the "belt-tightening" method of the 1990s will only deepen recession-driven hardships.

Canadians are counting on every premier in this country to act now to reduce and prevent poverty. And they're counting on the premiers

to rise above jurisdictional differences and bring the Prime Minister on board for a coordinated recession-fighting poverty reduction plan. Our premiers have a heavy responsibility but also hold tremendous power.

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