

Promise to world's children remains unkept after 20 years ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If you were to look carefully at the pictures hanging in the offices of UNICEF bureaucrats at UN headquarters in New York, Brian Mulroney's face would be smiling right back at you. The then prime minister stands proudly, front row centre, among all the 191 heads of state who ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

And proud he should have been. Canadian negotiators played important and constructive roles in helping to craft the UN Convention that received more support than any other UN document of its kind. That was 20 years ago this Friday, Nov. 20.

This document articulates the rights of children all over the world in a comprehensive and inspiring way that we should all be proud of, but 20 years later it is still a promise unkept, a duty unfulfilled.

In 1989 about one in seven Canadian children lived in poverty; in 2009 this is not much changed.

Child rights are certainly about more than families having enough money. They are about health care, about education, about protection, and about having parents and governments promoting interests that range from freedom to play, to mental health, to involvement in broader religious and ethnic communities.

But keeping families out of poverty is important, and in our country central. Living in a family with adequate resources, enough to meet basic needs but also enough to participate fully in society, makes a lot of these other things possible.

The UN looks at the economic and social rights of the child in the same way as political rights, as a matter of law, as if passing laws can enforce commitments made, as if governments can be held to account.

But it is not that simple.

Over the last 20 years, the world of work has become increasingly challenging for young families. Labour market inequality has increased tremendously, with only the very very richest among us gaining from the almost 15 years of uninterrupted economic growth since 1993.

Families are more stressed, and the lack of a comprehensive child care system has had the effect of making families convenient for the labour market, rather than the other way around. It is no wonder that separation and divorce rates are higher.

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While our governments can't be held entirely accountable for this failure, they are not free from blame. Child poverty simply has not been a priority for public policy.

Leadership, more than any other ingredient has been missing, and in this regard Canadian federalism has not served our children well.

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At no time has any federal leader stood up and publicly made the same sort of commitment that Tony Blair made in the United Kingdom. In that country a strong declaration by the prime minister to eliminate child poverty in a generation focused attention and energy, and led to a substantial reduction in the number of poor children over the span of just the last 10 years.

How much more important this sort of leadership is in our much looser federation.

But the amazing thing is that in the last few years a succession of provincial governments have taken the initiative and stepped into the void created by a retreating federal government. Quebec, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador and, most recently, Nova Scotia have all articulated priorities and policies directed to poverty reduction, strategies in which children figure importantly.

But they are all now hesitating. The inevitable excuse being that the recession has limited what can be done, as if higher unemployment rates makes the issue less rather more urgent.

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Some things can be done without recourse to a lot of money.

Our governments could focus on particularly challenging situations including aboriginal children and children in some immigrant

communities and neighbourhoods in which poverty is concentrated. They could also focus resources on children with mental health concerns and other disabilities through appropriate and mandated programs in the schools.

They could institute a budget ombudsman or child advocate who reviews the impact that all budgetary decisions have on children, and publicly questions the priorities embedded in our budgets.

Finally, if they are not ready to stand up proudly and give voice to the rights of children, then they should put into place reforms that magnify the voices that already exist.

The most important would be reforming an electoral system that disenfranchises all those younger than 18 by allowing their parents to cast additional votes for each of their children.

Maybe only then when they have to actually look their electorate in the eyes will there be sufficient resolve to make child rights the priority that a commitment made 20 years ago stated it should be.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Canada ^[2]

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