

Plight of poor puts Canada's social fabric at risk ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If you've worked all your life and never been poor, why should you care about people who rely on food banks, minimum-wage jobs and social assistance?

Art Eggleton said yesterday Canadians need to take a long look at the future of our economy and understand ignoring the needs of the poor will hurt everyone.

"Poverty affects us all," said Eggleton. "I'm trying to reach middle-class people who have no experience with poverty."

Eggleton, the former mayor of Toronto, Liberal MP and now a senator, was in Winnipeg to join forces with several anti-poverty groups calling for the federal and provincial governments to eliminate poverty. Eggleton was chairman of a Senate committee charged with studying poverty, housing challenges and homelessness in major Canadian cities. The committee's report, *In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness*, was released this spring.

He said a focus has to be elevating disadvantaged groups such as aboriginals, new immigrants, the disabled and single parents from poverty. If the effort's not made, he said, we're all going to suffer.

"We need to ensure future prosperity," he said. "If we help give these people the tools they need to lift them up - education, training, support services, child care - they are contributing to our social programs. We've got an aging population and if we don't have workers contributing to CPP and EI we're in trouble."

The press conference coincided with the Winnipeg meeting of Canadian premiers.

"I think our best hope are our premiers," Eggleton said diplomatically. "The one message I hear is that the federal government needs to be at the table too."

But the trick is getting poverty (and its related ills) onto the agenda. The same people have been fighting the social justice fight for decades. As for the poor? Most politicians seem to believe they don't vote. If we don't have the political and social will to change, the status of the poor won't improve. None of us benefits.

Eggleton has read an estimate that poverty costs Canadian taxpayers \$30 billion a year. That's everything from justice to health care to shelter. The poorest people make up one-quarter of the community yet use twice the average health-care services, he said.

Eggleton said Canadians need to understand that poverty will hurt us all. Taxes may have to be increased, he said, or health care cut. If we don't get as many people as possible (including new Canadians who are barred from immediately working in their professional fields) contributing to our social-welfare system, we will lose it.

The poor are much more than the beggars you see downtown. They're everyone trying to survive on minimum wage, every family that can't afford to have friends over for dinner once a month and every person who is one pay cheque away from disaster. We can give them a leg up or watch everything we take for granted gutted.

One of yesterday's panellists called on Canadians to "focus on the human cost of this recession." She didn't mean people who watched their stock portfolios shrink. She meant those who can't find affordable places to live in Winnipeg, where the vacancy rate is minuscule and 15 per cent of us live under the poverty line.

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