

A Canada without compassion: A modest proposal from the Fraser Institute ^[1]

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Excerpts:

The Fraser Institute would like to remove compassion from the policy debate about poverty in Canada. Why? Because, according to the author of this report, Christopher Sarlo, compassion is causing us to confuse those who have lower income with those who do not have enough income to sustain life. For Sarlo, those who use relative measures of poverty, which set a poverty line relative to, for example, the median income in Canada, are being misled by emotions. He writes: "Poverty, like disability, is an emotional issue, laden with strong feelings of sadness and disapprobation, but there is surely some value in setting emotion aside in order to measure the phenomenon as objectively as possible."

There are two (objective) problems with this argument. First, the alternative measure Sarlo proposes is not actually an absolute measure of poverty, it is a relative measure of poverty - just like the relative measures of poverty that the report criticizes. Second, if compassion is excluded as a basis for attending to poverty, what reason could there be to proliferate models for measuring it? Why single out child poverty as an area for particular attention (as Sarlo is careful to do)? Let them eat cake.

Any measure of poverty that includes anything beyond water, food, and protection from exposure is relative. Sarlo's proposed absolute measure of poverty, the "Basic Needs Poverty Measure," includes telephone service and furniture. These are not things needed to sustain physical existence. Their inclusion must therefore be based on an idea about a relative standard of living in Canada. That is to say, relative to the lifestyle of the average Canadian, not having phone service is seen as a form of deprivation or social exclusion. Thus, the major advantage that Sarlo claims for the "Basic Needs Poverty Measure" - that it is absolute in nature - doesn't actually apply to his own measure. It is simply a lower relative measure. It is presumably informed by "feelings of sadness and disapprobation" when confronted with the thought of someone living without furniture and a telephone.

Why not lower the standard for measuring poverty even further? It would be possible to generate an average amount of income needed to provide for the minimum necessities required to sustain life. The result would be that we could assess how many Canadians are living at that threshold. Why would one do this? The reason can be inferred from the report's criticism of other poverty measures, which it views as "a catalyst for change- change, that is to say, in the direction of a larger, more active government." To measure anything beyond absolute poverty is to implicitly demand more support from the state and therefore a (fiscally) larger state government. It follows from this argument that (with respect to poverty) the state should only take responsibility for sustaining life. This argument, extended into other areas of government activity would suggest eliminating the family doctor and supporting only emergency rooms (I mean, if you're not dying, then it is not my problem).

There is no objective or absolute reason to limit the Canadian government's responsibility to its population to sustaining that population's physical existence. The decision is based on a choice about whose interests are more important. In this case, Sarlo's report assumes that the interests of those whose incomes would be taxed to support a state to do anything beyond sustaining life trump the interests of those living in 'relative' but not absolute poverty. This is not only a choice, but an emotional choice at that. It is a choice to show compassion for one group (those whose incomes would be taxed by a less than minimal state) over another (those in low income but not absolute poverty).

It is a choice to make that old Victorian distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. This distinction is evident in the report's implication that poor people lie about their levels of income (because how else could you live on \$6000 a year and not be dead?) and the report's generation of a new category of "non poor people [who] need extra assistance" versus poor people who have been poor for a long period of time (because they choose to be poor-you know, like students and artists).

This isn't rational or objective. It is emotional and particular. It withholds compassion for children living in low income families (who are not starving), on the basis that they experience "social exclusion" for all kinds of reasons other than income, such as "their looks, their ethnicity, their sexuality, their friends, their taste in music." The [il]logic of this argument is that if you experience social exclusion for more than one reason, it's not the state's problem.

It is a choice to withhold compassion from individuals living in low income who get married and have children because "having a spouse or children is a choice" which provides emotional benefits (therefore offsetting the deficits of the suffering caused by living in low incomes). Which is to say, if you have good things in your life, the bad things (like living in low income) are not my problem.

It withholds compassion from those who experience health problems linked to living in low incomes (such as increased risk of diabetes) because "there are surely a myriad of factors that can negatively influence health: genetics and family history, poverty (real deprivation), smoking and substance abuse, stress brought on by major life events." Which is to say that if living in low income is only one of several determinants of poor health, it doesn't count and it's not my problem.

Who receives compassion in this report? Who benefits from producing a lower relative measure of poverty or a lower yet absolute measure of poverty? Certainly not anyone living in low income (but not absolute poverty). How about the middle class? Not so fast. As Sarlo himself points out, most people living in low income move in and out of that condition. That means that many of the people living below those relative measures of poverty (the LIM and LICO) this year, were middle class last year, and may yet be middle class again with (here's the kicker) some help from an 'active' state. So that leaves people living with high incomes to benefit from Sarlo's compassion and this version of a state policy on poverty.

If you don't earn a six figure salary or own a six bedroom house, this is your problem.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: poverty ^[4]

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