

Ottawa urged to put child poverty pledge into action ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the wake of last month's near unanimous reaffirmation of Parliament's 1989 pledge to end child poverty, activists are urging federal politicians to show how they would turn this latest promise into action.

In a letter to the four federal party leaders Wednesday, Campaign 2000 is calling for detailed anti-poverty plans to be part of this year's federal election.

"First, it is the right thing to do for our children and for all of us," says the network of more than 120 national, provincial and community partners dedicated to fighting child poverty. "Second, poverty is expensive, costing Canada an estimated \$72 (billion) to \$86 billion annually." Children who grow up in poor families suffer more illness throughout life, get less education and are more likely to be unemployed, the group notes.

Toronto single mother S. Khan, who is struggling to raise a 2-year-old son on social assistance payments of less than \$1,200 a month, hopes the issue becomes a major plank in the campaign platforms of all the parties.

"I am using a broken stroller and rely on handouts for my son. It really hurts," said the former teacher. Khan, 39, alleges she suffered a miscarriage in Pakistan at the hands of a violent spouse and escaped to Canada when she was pregnant with son.

"Canada is a wonderful country and I am grateful for everything. But we must do better," she said.

The Feb. 4 private member's motion by Toronto MP Rathika Sitsabaiesan (NDP-Scarborough-Rouge River) commits Ottawa to work with the provinces and aboriginal communities to eradicate child poverty, by developing a national poverty reduction plan with measurable targets and timelines.

Every MP present that day, except Conservative Bradley Trost (Saskatoon-Humboldt), voted in favour, including Prime Minister Stephen Harper, NDP Leader Tom Mulcair and Green Party Leader Elizabeth May. Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau was absent. Bloc Quebecois Leader Mario Beaulieu is not elected.

Sitsabaiesan's motion says the government's anti-poverty plan should include affordable housing, accessible and affordable child care, childhood nutrition, income security and measures to address the unique needs of First Nation, Inuit and Métis communities. It has been more than 25 years since Ottawa's 1989 vow to end child poverty by 2000. But, lacking a plan or timeline, the percentage of poor children in Canada swelled from 15.8 per cent that year to 19.1 per cent in 2012. Poverty among indigenous children is about 40 per cent, Campaign 2000 notes in its letter to the party leaders.

The measure often regarded as Canada's poverty line - Statistics Canada's Low Income Measure, after taxes and government transfers for a single parent with one child - was \$23,755 in 2012, the latest date for which data is available.

"We know that this shameful anniversary was a real reminder," Campaign 2000 national co-ordinator Anita Khanna said, of the 25th anniversary of the 1989 vote last November.

"It caused a lot of people to pause and think about what it means for a generation to have grown up in the shadow of this promise," she said. "With a federal election right around the corner, this is why we are calling on (the politicians) to make good on what they have approved and the aspiration that they have again endorsed."

Since 1989, Canada's economy has more than doubled, while child poverty has grown by 17 per cent, the letter says. But public policies can make a difference, says Campaign 2000, noting that the Canada Pension Plan has reduced poverty among seniors by 25 per cent since 1970. Child poverty in Scandinavian countries has been cut to below 7 per cent since the introduction of affordable child care, housing and post-secondary education programs, the letter adds.

"We have heard a lot of talk and good intentions about poverty," Khanna said. "What we need now is for Canadians to have a chance to judge the plans."

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