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**CAROLE TAYLOR APPROACHES HER MOMENT OF TRUTH**

**By Steve Kerstetter**

**First Call**

BC Finance Minister Carole Taylor is approaching her political moment of truth with the provincial government's whopping \$4.1 billion surplus this past year and more to come in the years ahead.

Taylor could take the easy way out - tax cuts, debt repayment, infrastructure or spending on only the most popular government programs - and eventually retire from politics with a legacy that is totally unoriginal and easily forgotten.

Or she could decide to make a real difference in the lives of low-income British Columbians by leading the charge against BC's truly shameful record on poverty.

Taylor and the rest of the BC Liberals have promised a golden future for BC, a future that will make the province the best place to live in Canada. But that goal will never be reached as long as a significant portion of the population is cut off from the mainstream of community life by virtue of their very low incomes.

The BC Progress Board set up six years ago to monitor a host of economic and social indicators says in its most recent report that the province had the second worst poverty record of any province in 2005. An estimated 17.2 percent of all family units were living below Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs after income taxes. That's 97,000 families plus 217,000 unattached persons.

The record on child poverty is just as dismal. BC has had the very worst child poverty rate of any province for four consecutive years. There were 126,000 poor children in BC in 2005, or 15.2 percent of all children, according to Statistics Canada.

The Progress Board has been scratching its head about the reasons for such high poverty rates in a province where the economy as a whole is booming. Meanwhile, the social policy community in BC and elsewhere in Canada has come to a remarkably close consensus on what needs to be done. The list includes the following items:

\* A speedy increase in the minimum wage to \$10 or \$11 an hour followed by annual cost-of-living increases in the minimum wage. It seems ludicrous that a BC government which values paid work so highly would allow a person to work full-time full-year and still wind up below the poverty line.

\* A major increase in social housing construction by both the federal and provincial governments. The 2007 BC budget was mostly small tax cuts disguised as a housing budget.

\* A full-fledged child care system to replace the current patchwork system of grants and subsidies that serves some, but not most BC parents with young children.

\* A hefty and immediate increase in BC welfare rates and automatic cost-of-living increases every year thereafter. The small and selective increases of recent years are not even credible first steps toward reasonable welfare rates.

\* A provincial return to the field of child benefits in a meaningful way. The BC government has been clawing back provincial benefits every year as the federal government increases the National Child Benefit Supplement. The BC Family Bonus has virtually disappeared, and the BC Earned Income Benefit has become a shadow of its former self.

Everyone realizes that a war on poverty won't be won overnight, but it also won't be won with tiny changes in policy here and there.

Canada's one successful war on poverty attacked poverty among the elderly. Poverty rates for seniors have been falling for many years, and the reason is a series of major initiatives mounted by governments in the middle of the last century - Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement, the Canada and Quebec Pension Plans, social housing projects for seniors, and medicare, which made a real difference in the lives and pocketbooks of the people who use more health care than any other age group.

The big questions for the current century are: Will Taylor and her counterparts in other jurisdictions finally start listening to the advice they get about fighting poverty from the social policy community, organized labour, and even the occasional business group, and will they finally start acting on that advice?

The answers to those questions in BC will determine in large part whether Taylor spends her time in office as just another politician or a leader who was daring enough to become a champion of people in need. That in turn will determine whether the BC Liberal government finally comes to the aid of the hundreds of thousands of children, women and men who live in poverty amidst the plenty that is the rest of British Columbia.

*(Kerstetter is a member of the co-ordinating committee of First Call, the BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition.)*