



202 – 1193 Kingsway
Vancouver, BC V5V 3C9
604-873-8437/1-800-307-1212
info@firstcallbc.org
www.firstcallbc.org

FOR RELEASE ON OR AFTER MAY 29

ONE BIG ISSUE MISSED BY THE PROVINCE: FIGHTING POVERTY

By Steve Kerstetter

Now that the legislature has completed its spring session, we should all turn our attention to the one enormous issue that the BC government takes pains to avoid: fighting poverty.

The latest benchmark report from the BC Progress Board, set up by Premier Campbell, showed BC with the second highest poverty rate of any province. BC also had the worst record of any province in making progress against poverty during the years 1996 through 2005.

Figures for 2006 just released by Statistics Canada showed BC once again in second to last place. The latest poverty rate using the agency's low-income measures after income taxes was 16.6 percent of all families and unattached persons. That works out to 546,000 poor persons, a number just a tad smaller than the entire population of the City of Vancouver.

“Low income matters for two reasons,” says a report from the Progress Board.

“First, equality of opportunity is an important goal in British Columbia. All children, irrespective of their social background, should have an equal chance to succeed in the province, and there is compelling evidence that children from low income families are at greater risk.”

“Second, governments and society as a whole bear important collective costs that flow from high levels of economic marginalization in the province. The fact that one in ten British Columbians lives on the economic margins for extended periods stands as a pressing policy challenge.”

Yet we seldom hear Premier Campbell talk about poverty. There's talk of his “golden goals” for BC, the new carbon tax, and the impending glory of the 2010 Olympics, but little about the fact that BC ranks next to last among the provinces in the Progress Board's own rating of social condition.

Meanwhile, Claude Richmond, the retiring minister of employment and income assistance, has the nerve to argue that BC is actually leading the way in the reduction of poverty.

In other words, BC once had a really bad record on poverty, but now it only has a bad record. The child poverty rate for 2006 was 16.1 percent, the worst in Canada for the fifth year in a row.

There have indeed been some improvements in social policy during the current mandate of the BC Liberals. There have been small increases in welfare rates, for example, and some improvements in rental assistance for low-income families.

But what's been done barely begins to meet the task at hand.

A special Statistics Canada study for BC said employment is the single biggest issue that separates the BC poverty rate from the national rate, yet we have not seen any increase in the minimum wage of \$8 an hour. Meanwhile, there were over 245,000 employees in BC earning less than \$10 an hour and over 185,000 other employees that were paid between \$10 and \$12 an hour in 2006.

Child care is another core issue where the demand for high-quality, affordable care remains many times greater than the supply.

Welfare rates remain far below what any person outside government would regard as reasonable. Current rates are below what they were way back in 1994, after adjusting for inflation.

Yet neither of the two parties in the legislature has gone beyond the rhetoric. The government stands out for its inaction and its inability to listen to even its own advisers. The NDP opposition talks a good game, but has yet to say what it would actually do, aside from raising the minimum wage to \$10 an hour, if it wins the 2009 provincial election.

Meanwhile, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Manitoba all have adopted poverty reduction plans, and Ontario and Nova Scotia are headed in the same direction. Unless there are serious changes in policy in our province, BC is certain to remain at the bottom of the heap in looking after the well-being of ALL its residents.

(Kerstetter is a member of the co-ordinating committee of First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, and a former director of the National Council of Welfare in Ottawa.)