

July 26, 2006

Fixing the social imbalance will build a stronger Canada

By Laurel Rothman and Adrienne Montani

As the premiers meet in Newfoundland, Premier Gordon Campbell argues that Canadian taxpayers are overtaxed and receiving too little from government spending. He urges us to build our economy by increasing our competitiveness, including fostering greater mobility of labour and business investment.

Yet Canadians are more than taxpayers. The people providing the labour are also members of families trying to sustain stable and healthy communities in which to raise our children. When a competitive labour market fails to provide parents with enough money to meet their families' needs, they must be able to rely on community infrastructure and supports, provided by our government and funded by taxes, such as quality child care and education, income supports like child benefits, parental leave and affordable housing. These are investments that are key to healthy child development, and therefore to a healthy economy and society.

Drastic reductions in federal funding to the provinces in the mid-1990s led to a massive decline in the quality and availability of health care and social programs. While there has been some catch up in health care, other social programs are still severely underfunded.

Prime Minister Harper's claim that a strong social union can be created by individual provinces spending within their means ignores the different revenue-generating ability of provinces. His position will only deepen regional disparities. Troubling disparities also extend beyond provincial and territorial boundaries.

Across the country inter-generational, gender and ethno-social divisions are becoming entrenched. Canada's poverty rate for children and youth has not dropped below 17% since 2000 despite strong economic growth. Women are working longer hours, but often for poverty-level pay. Employer demands for "Canadian work experience" and failure to recognize foreign credentials leave new immigrants to languish on the outskirts of society despite their increased qualifications. A baby born into an Aboriginal family is twice as likely to die as a baby born to a non-Aboriginal. Young families are mired in student debt, one factor in the 30% growth in poverty over the past decade for households headed by parents under 35.

Made-in-Canada solutions exist. They are found in the Canada Child Tax Benefit, in Newfoundland and Labrador's Action Plan to Reduce Poverty, and in Quebec's Anti-Poverty legislation.

Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams' commitment to achieving the lowest poverty rate in Canada by 2010 is inspiring and courageous. The province's plan recognizes that reducing poverty not only improves the life chances of people with low incomes, but it promotes a prosperous future for all.

Quebec's Anti-Poverty Legislation has combined affordable, accessible child care, an expanded parental leave program, and an enhanced child benefit. In doing so, Quebec went from having one of the highest child poverty rates in Canada to one of the lowest.

These best practices need to be taken national. The Premiers must push the federal government to come to the table to define and ensure an acceptable minimum standard of well-being for all Canadians. First steps to repair the damage from more than a decade of social program cuts will include: quality, accessible education from early childhood through to post-secondary, beginning with reinstating the national child care program; restoring employment insurance benefits; expanding the child benefit; providing settlement supports for new Canadians; and fulfilling the Kelowna Accord with First Nations and a focus on urban Aboriginal issues.

Many of the Premiers are arguing that the fiscal imbalance must be fixed, but their discussions must be about more than accounting principles. Their own Advisory Panel on the Fiscal Imbalance heard this over and over in their citizen dialogues. Social programs and the benefits they conferred were considered more important than financial formulas. Canadians still recognize that as a community we can accomplish so much more by working together than we could ever dream of doing alone. If the Premiers' final communiqué contains this vision, Canadians will rally behind them.

Laurel Rothman is the National Coordinator of Campaign 2000, a non-partisan cross Canada network of over 100 organizations committed to working together to end child and family poverty in Canada. Tel 416-575-9230

Adrienne Montani is the Provincial Coordinator of First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. Tel 604-875-2000 ext. 6928.