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TWENTY YEARS LATER – A SECOND LOOK

This is the first in a series of monthly reports by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition on child poverty in British Columbia. The series is a continuing call to the BC government to start getting serious about fighting child and family poverty.

The provincial government has spent the last several years trying to explain away the poverty statistics. The latest shots came on November 24 on the government web site.

www.gov.bc.ca/fortherecord/childpoverty/cp_poverty.html

None of the figures were incorrect, but they gave the misleading impression that BC is a leader in fighting poverty. The technique is what statisticians call “cherry picking,” using selected figures that seem to reinforce the argument you’re trying to make.

Let’s take a longer-term view of the child poverty statistics and compare poverty rates twenty years ago in 1989 and in 2007. The year 1989 was the best year of the 1980s for the economy, and the national child poverty rate was 15.3 percent. It was also the year that the House of Commons voted unanimously to work to end child poverty by the year 2000.

Canada never got anywhere near that goal. In fact, the national child poverty rate in 2007 was 15 percent. The year 2007, like 1989, came at the end of a long cycle of economic growth prior to the current recession.

The table shows the poverty rates for Canada and each of the provinces in 1989 and 2007.

CHILD POVERTY RATES IN 1989 AND 2007, CANADA AND ALL PROVINCES			
	1989	2007	% CHANGE
Alberta	19.3	11.2	-42%
Prince Edward Island	13.5	8.3	-39%
Newfoundland and Labrador	20.0	13.0	-35%
Saskatchewan	21.9	16.7	-24%
Manitoba	22.7	18.8	-17%
Nova Scotia	16.1	14.9	-7%
New Brunswick	17.9	16.7	-7%
Quebec	16.0	14.9	-7%
CANADA	15.3	15.0	-2%
Ontario	11.9	14.5	+22%
British Columbia	14.5	18.8	+30%

Source: Statistics Canada, Income Trends in Canada 1976 to 2007
(Low Income Cut-Offs Before Taxes)

Eight provinces reported declines in the child poverty rate in this 20 year period, some of which were dramatic. British Columbia and Ontario were the only provinces that did worse over this time period, with BC the worst by far. Together, child poverty in these two provinces kept the national child poverty rate from falling significantly.

The provincial government of Ontario recently passed anti-poverty legislation with the unanimous support of the legislature that seeks to reduce the child poverty rate by 25 percent over five years.

In BC, the provincial government has refused to address the issue with a broadly-based plan for poverty reduction and targets and timelines to hold governments to account for their actions. As a result, BC has a long-time record of failure that leaves the child poverty rate higher in 2007 than in 1989.

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The 2009 BC Child Poverty Report Card is available at www.firstcallbc.org.

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