

TWENTY QUESTIONS FOR BC POLITICIANS ON ELIMINATING POVERTY

From time to time, BC politicians express concerns about poverty, but none of the major political parties has actually mounted a sustained campaign for fighting poverty.

In deference to that old party game Twenty Questions, here are twenty questions about poverty (and a few supplementary questions) to ask our provincial politicians.

1. First and foremost, do you believe poverty is a real and pressing problem in British Columbia? (If the answer is no, then what do you say about all those people who try to look after their families on incomes of \$25,000 a year or less?)
2. Will your party enact a law that commits the provincial government to cutting the poverty rate in half by 2020?
3. Will your party develop and implement an action plan to cut the poverty rate in half? (If the answer is yes, will you publish annual updates and will you make improvements in the action plan each year that the poverty rate does not come down as targeted?)
4. Are you prepared to accept Statistics Canada poverty lines in British Columbia and use them as a benchmark for measuring poverty?
5. Will you raise the BC minimum wage in stages to \$11 an hour to boost the incomes of low-wage workers? (If the answer is no, how do you expect a minimum wage worker working full time full year to get above the poverty line? How do you expect a single parent earning minimum wage to provide adequately for his or her children?)
6. At a time when most other jurisdictions in Canada have minimum wages much higher than BC, is there any convincing argument that BC would be hurt by an increase in the minimum wage?
7. Will you support indexing the minimum wage every January 1 so the incomes of BC's poorest workers do not lose ground to inflation?
8. Will you encourage employers in both the public and private sectors to pay "living wages" to parents to provide essential opportunities for themselves and their children? (Living wage calculations have been done for Metro Vancouver, Greater Victoria, Abbotsford and a number of other municipalities. Contact info@livingwageforfamilies.ca for more information.)
9. Will you support increasing BC welfare rates to the after-tax poverty line? (If the answer is no, is there any rational, ethical or practical reason for keeping BC children in deep poverty simply because their parents do not have decent jobs or can't work?)
10. Will you support the annual indexing of welfare rates every January 1 so people on welfare do not lose ground to inflation? (If the answer is no, how do you expect parents on income assistance to afford nutritious food and appropriate shelter?)

11. Will you support restoring earnings exemptions for income assistance recipients classified as employable and allowing parents on income assistance to keep at least some of their child support payments?

12. Would you be prepared to live on a welfare income for one month to test the adequacy of current welfare rates? (If the answer is no, then how do you know that current welfare rates are reasonable?)

13. What specific steps is your party prepared to take to remove the financial barriers to higher education and to lower student debt levels?

14. Will your party introduce a comprehensive plan for early childhood education and child care that features high quality care, is universally available to parents with children and is affordable for all who take advantage of it? (If the answer is yes, in what year will these programs become universal and affordable in BC?)

15. More specifically, what new services is your party prepared to provide for infant care, toddler care, preschool care, and before-school and after-school care?

16. What additional supports are you prepared to provide for youth in government care when they reach 19 to help them start their lives as adults?

17. Do you believe that income inequality is a problem in British Columbia? (If the answer is no, how do you accept the reality that the poorest ten percent of BC families with children have average total incomes of only \$17,367 while the richest ten percent of BC families with children have average total incomes of \$248,701?)

18. Does your party believe that the current system of taxation in British Columbia is fair and reasonable? (If yes or if no, explain your answer.)

19. Are you prepared to raise taxes for the richest British Columbians and/or for large corporations operating in BC to fight poverty and raise additional money for public programs that benefit British Columbians? (If the answer is no, what does your party propose to make up shortfalls in financing public schools, health care and other necessary social services?)

20. Are you prepared to press the federal government to join the fight against poverty by enhancing programs within federal jurisdiction (e.g. the Canadian Child Tax Benefit, Employment Insurance)? (If the answer is yes, will you raise the issue at the next federal-provincial-territorial meeting of first ministers?)

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is interested in the responses given to these questions. Drop us a line at info@firstcallbc.org and share what you've heard!