

Speech by Jean Swanson
Launch of Make Poverty History
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Vancouver BC

We're here today to talk about a campaign to end poverty globally and locally.

The key concept in this campaign is that governments make decisions that cause poverty and they can also make decisions that end it.

That's what Bill Clinton implied in his speech at the Millennium Summit: (there are) "more people in this room with the power to achieve this goal than have ever been gathered in one place."

Nelson Mandela said it in London when he spoke in support of the Make Poverty History campaign: "Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man made and can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings."

There is certainly enough wealth available in the world to end poverty. This year there are 691 billionaires with a total of \$2.2 trillion in wealth. In BC alone we have over 56,000 millionaires with an average of nearly \$3 million each.

At least in the back of our minds, I think everyone knows that poverty is wrong. Few people in Vancouver are comfortable seeing homeless people pushing shopping carts. No one feels happy that there are sick and starving people all over the world.

Why is ending poverty important? I think most people know this in the back of their minds too. Hiroshi Nakajima of the World Health Organization explained it this way: "Poverty is the world's deadliest disease. It wields its destructive influence at every stage of human life and for most of its victims the only escape is an early grave."

Poverty is also Canada's most deadly disease. Dr. Dennis Raphael of York University sees this and questions why governments decide to increase poverty. He asks: "What can you do to threaten the health of the population in general?" Then he answers: "You reduce welfare payments, remove social housing units, eliminate rent control and don't raise the minimum wage."

It's also important to end poverty because having a more equal society and world is a foundation of democracy. We all also know in the back of our minds that a homeless person in Canada or one of the 24,000 people who will die of hunger today don't have nearly the power to make the rules that govern our societies as millionaires and billionaires have.

This Make Poverty History campaign must push the idea of ending poverty, the reasons for ending poverty, and the reality that decisions by politicians can end poverty from the back to the front of everyone's mind.

What decisions could end poverty?

In Canada, governments have been making decisions that increase poverty for at least the last 10 years. In 1996 the federal government decided to end the Canada Assistance Plan that guaranteed every Canadian the right to an adequate amount of income. Once the right to an adequate amount of income was abolished in federal law, provinces were free to decide to reduce welfare and deny it to people in need.

Only 19% of homeless people in the Lower Mainland survey released yesterday were on welfare, the income of last resort in Canada. That's because the BC government decided in 2002 to bring in rules that deny welfare to people in dire need. As a result of this decision homelessness has doubled in three years. The BC government also decided to cut welfare benefits for families by hundreds of dollars a month in some cases. As a result of this decision these families who need welfare have become poorer and food bank use by families has increased over 40%.

The Federal government also decided to reduce UI benefits and the number of people who could collect them. They decided to change the rules so drastically that the percent of unemployed people who can get benefits has dropped from nearly 90 % in the late 80's to about 40% now. This decision made unemployed people poorer. Then the federal government decided to stop funding new social housing. This decision made people who need affordable housing poorer.

Both federal and provincial governments have decided over the last 3 decades not to let minimum wages increase with inflation. This decision has made people who depend on low wage jobs poorer.

Internationally, the Structural Adjustment Programs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund force government of poor countries to make decisions like these as a condition of getting badly needed loans.

The Make Poverty History campaign wants governments to decide to do three things:

First, they must decide to cancel the debts of the world's poorest countries. Second they should deliver at least \$50 billion more in aid to poor countries and make it work more effectively. Third, they need to decide to change trade rules so poor countries can make their own decisions about how to end poverty, protect their environment, and promote fair trade.

Getting governments to make decisions to end poverty won't be easy. I think it's useful to identify why it will be hard so we don't go into this campaign naively.

Racism is alive and well. It makes some human beings think others are less important and deserving than themselves. That's something we must all tackle.

People in power contrive elaborate justifications to make the wants of the rich seem more important than the needs of the poor. We're seeing that this week as Jack Layton and Paul Martin came up with their deal to put an extra \$1.6 billion into affordable housing and an extra half billion into foreign aid. They made a decision that will help reduce poverty locally and globally. But the Globe and Mail, owned by Canada's richest billionaire, called this decision "a grubby little deal,"

and "a crummy deal." They don't like the fact that the deal rescinds a planned tax cut for big corporations. Globe articles have ignored comments by homeless and third world advocates in favour of comments from corporate lobby groups like the CD Howe Institute and Canadian Manufacturing Association. These comments make it seem like the sky will fall for the whole country if corporations lose a tax break.

There's also a huge culture of poor bashing that blames people who are poor for their poverty rather than blaming the decisions of the governments that caused their poverty. For example, Premier Campbell has a Task Force on Homelessness, Addiction and Mental Illness. Just the name of the task force implies that homelessness is caused by addiction or mental illness, and not by government decisions to deny welfare or affordable housing to people in need who may or may not have a mental illness or addiction.

And media coverage of poverty issues, if it isn't blaming the poor, usually evokes pity for a suffering individual that might generate a bit of charity. But the corporate owned media often refuses to dig a little deeper than the individual and reveal the government decisions that caused the poverty and suffering in the first place.

Lastly, there will be a huge amount of pressure from powerful corporations and their lobby groups and their think tanks who will be trying to frame how we think about poverty just as they are trying to frame how we think about the Layton-Martin budget. After all, the low wages of poverty mean more profit. After all, if there are lots of unemployed people, they have to work for less to get a job. After all, if few taxes are paid, profits are higher. These corporations will also push for free trade, which is really about giving them more rights and local people around the world less say about what happens in their communities. They will want us to think that ending poverty is an individual responsibility, that corporate profits will trickle down to everyone else, that government shouldn't decide to reduce poverty directly.

We're up against a lot but we do have our own power to make poverty a priority and to organize to end it. Elections will be important times for the Make Poverty History campaign. In BC right now we need to demand that our politicians make decisions that end poverty, not create it. We need to demand an end to the barriers to getting on welfare, an increase in welfare rates, more affordable housing, an end to the training wage and higher minimum wages and the program of the Fulcrum project that's also on this agenda. Federally, we need to start now pushing all the parties so they can't ignore the Make Poverty History campaign in Canada or the world. We need commitments from them to work toward dropping the debt for poor countries, to spend more on aid, and to end their love affair with free trade and replace it with fair trade. And we need to work on returning the lost human right in Canada, the right to an adequate income when in need.

It's a big job. But I'm hopeful about the Make Poverty History campaign. Let's get out there with that message: government decisions can end poverty. We can make poverty history and it's about time.