

**October 2004 Commentary**

## **HIGH TIME FOR FAIR PLAY**

**By Steve Kerstetter**

Most Canadians believe in fair play. Most Canadians donate time and money to worthy causes and are happy to give a helping hand to people in need. Most Canadians know the importance of early childhood development and want children to get the best possible start in life.

So why is it that we allow governments to give such shabby treatment to people on welfare?

The children and the adults on welfare are among the poorest of the poor in Canada. They are poor because both the federal government and the BC government have decided that they should be poor.

That's not fair play. That's kicking people in the gut when they're down.

Welfare is Canada's social safety net of last resort, set up specifically for people who have exhausted other means of support, yet welfare incomes are pitifully low. And it's not much consolation that many welfare recipients are on welfare for relatively short periods of time. Privation is privation, whether it lasts a few months or a few years.

In British Columbia, the purchasing power of welfare and related benefits provided by the provincial government has been falling steadily ever since 1994, according to the latest tallies by the National Council of Welfare in Ottawa.

The Social Planning and Research Council of BC estimates that typical welfare incomes in BC for a single-parent family amount to as little as 59 percent of the cost of a minimum standard of living.

Or as First Call, the BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, puts it, "After the rent, there's not much left for food."

The quotation is the headline for the coalition's latest poster in its public awareness campaign called Everyone Counts.

"Every family deserves enough food to eat, a safe place to live and a decent chance in life," says the poster. "Tell your MLA that welfare cuts hurt families."

Getting in touch with your MLA is a particularly timely suggestion now that the BC government is looking at hefty surpluses - beginning with a surplus of up to \$1.1 billion for the current fiscal year.

Basically, the government has three possible ways of using the surplus: increasing public spending to offset the deep spending cuts it imposed early in its mandate, reducing taxes for individuals or businesses, and paying off some of the province's accumulated debt.

Increasing public spending is often not attractive to politicians. In the spirit of fair play, however, surely it's not too much to insist that the province reverse past spending cuts and also provide more financial help for people in need.

Decent income supports for welfare recipients should be high on the list of priorities, along with restoring the money cut from the many "people programs" housed in the Ministry of Children and Family Development and making additional investments in child care and public education.

Everyone deserves a fair shake from their elected representatives, but people who have suffered at the hands of government policy in years gone by certainly should be at the top of the list for fair treatment today.

*Steve Kerstetter is a member of the First Call co-ordinating committee and a former director of the National Council of Welfare. Everyone Counts posters are available from the coalition at 604-875-3629 or can be downloaded from the coalition's web site at [www.firstcallbc.org](http://www.firstcallbc.org)*