

## Standup Speak Out Against Poverty

Things came together like a perfect storm to give me the impetus to write this. First, the Hunger Count Report, released by The Canadian Association Of Food Banks in November ,2009.It revealed the heartbreaking statistics that 794,738 people turned to food banks during the month of March in 2009 over 18% for March of 2008. In Nova Scotia 20,344 individuals were assisted by food banks in March 2009.This is up 20% over March 2008. 72,000 people across Canada used the food bank for the first time in March 2009. It is revealing that 1/5 of people using food banks in Canada are in the labor force and still can't make ends meet. In fact working families account for 40% of people living in low income in Canada.Considered nationally food bank usage is currently at the same level as it was a decade ago; 87% of people who visited food banks in 2009 live in rental accommodations. Does this mean people are forced to cut down on food to pay the rent?

The second factor motivating me to write this was attending a screening of the film "Four Feet Up" by the National Film Board. One thing that stood out was the need to stop the Band-Aid approach to poverty, and have a holistic everybody working on a united front approach to deal with the systemic causes of poverty. The most poignant moment of the film was the social worker involved with the family saying, "when you're worried about feeding your children preventative care isn't an option, crisis management is because that's all you can do".

A friend recently said government policies create poverty and only government policy can end poverty. Something that has concerned me around policy is the disincentive built into our social assistance program. Specifically the policy around the recipient who tries to help himself by taking a job while on social assistance. Seventy per cent of the income earned is clawed back under the Employment Security Income Assistance program. Think about what this does to your initiative and self-esteem.

To support what I am saying, The Senate Sub Committee On Cities released its report in December 2009 "In From The Margins: A Call To Action On Public Housing And Homelessness." The committee's job was to determine how government, business, and the volunteer sector were able to help people escape poverty. They found decades of social policy have had devastating effects: when all the programs are working when the individual gets all possible income and social supports, the resulting income often still maintains people in poverty. At

their worst the existing policies and programs entrap people in poverty, and make it virtually impossible for too many people to escape reliance on income security programs even homeless shelters.

There has been a lot of evidence that the growing gap between the rich and poor has been increasing over the past two decades. ( see The Canadian Center For Policy Alternatives website ([www.policyalternatives.ca/projects/growing-gap](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/projects/growing-gap)) According to the Statistics Canada 2007 report the richest 20% of our population enjoyed an average of \$5,500 income increase in 2007. The poorest 20% saw an increase of \$300 over the previous year's market income. Middle income Canadians market incomes rose by an average of \$900 in 2007.

It is shameful to note, from various sources, that Canada has the 19<sup>th</sup> highest rate of poverty among 29 developed economies.

There is good news to report on November 24th Parliament made a commitment to a federal plan for the elimination of poverty. This plan should be grounded in a human rights perspective. Poverty as a human right is enshrined under the Canadian Charter of Right's and Freedoms, stipulated in article 7 which calls for The Security Of The Person.

What can we do to encourage progress? Call your MLA or MP and that the know your watchful and concerned. Sign onto The Dignity For All Campaign at "dignityforall.ca." You can write letters to the editor. You can join local organizations and committees that are working to eliminate poverty. You can speak up when you hear someone make negative comments or express judgmental attitudes about poor. You can support community events dealing with poverty for instance attending a film like "Four Feet Up". If everyone sent a postcard to Prime Minister Harper expressing concern about poverty do you think such an outpouring would be ignored? You may think you are a drop in the bucket but if there are many drops in the bucket people take notice. I close with Ghandi's challenge, "be the change you want in the world".

Your's, Sincerely  
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Vice-president  
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