Alberta's Social Issues Magazine

FIRST READING

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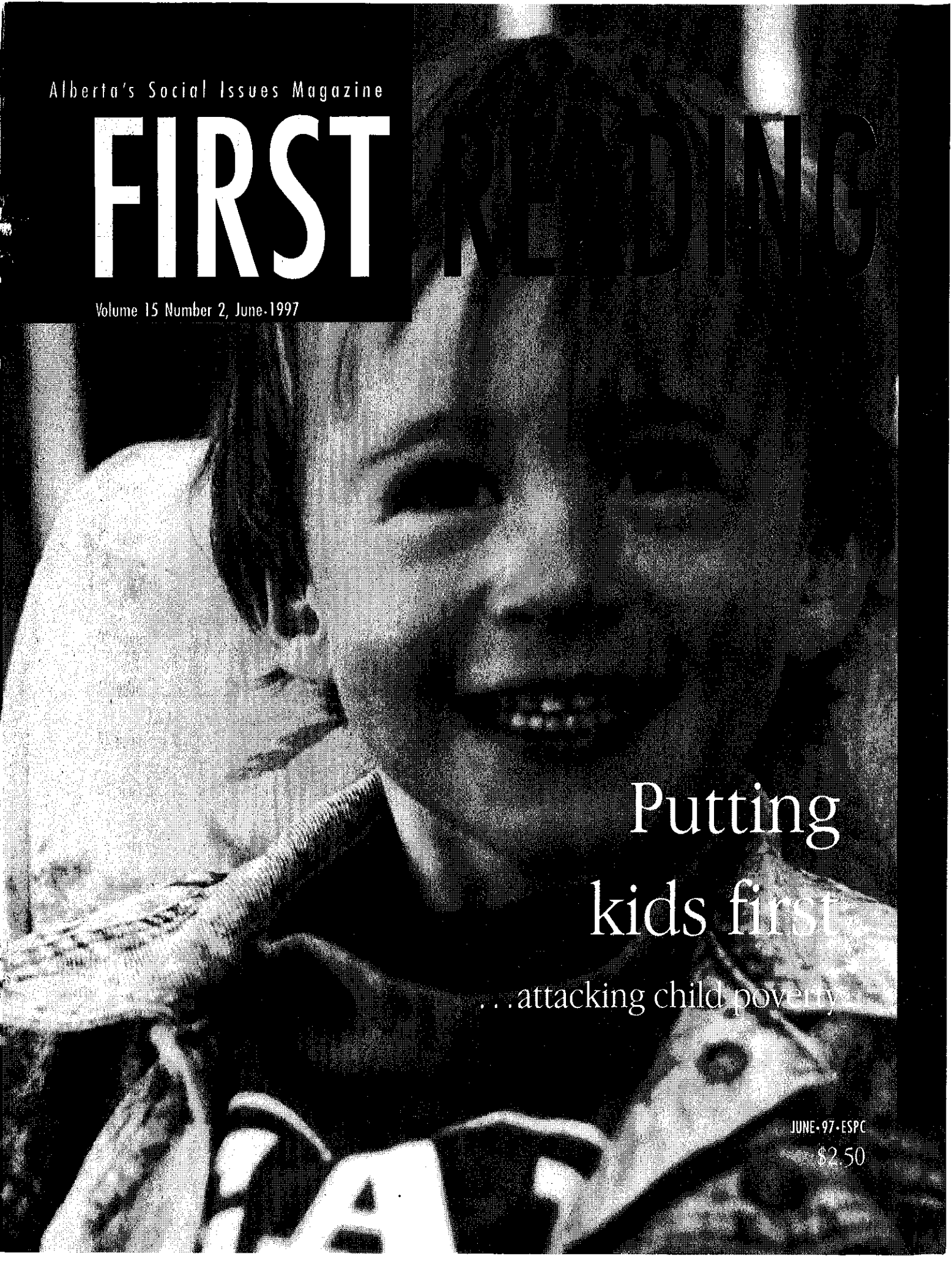

Putting kids first

. . . attacking child poverty

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Inside you'll find...

Vision

A community where all people have a commitment to social justice and shared responsibility as the foundation for community well being.

Mission

Responding to the changing political and social environment, the Edmonton Social Planning Council will:

- Identify trends and emerging social issues.
- Create opportunities to debate and address social issues.
- Initiate and support community action through research, coordination and advocacy.

When compared to other industrialized countries, Canada has the second highest rate of child poverty. (*Canadian Council of Social Development*)

Using Statistics Canada "Low Income Cut-offs" as a poverty line, the number of children living in poverty in Canada was nearly 1.5 million, or about one in five. (*Campaign 2000*)

Given these stark reminders of the depth of Canadian child poverty, it was with some relief that anti-poverty advocates received the news in January 1997 that Canada's Social Services Ministers had agreed to work together to create a national child poverty strategy. With the announcement in the federal budget that only $600 million was being provided as the "foundation," and not the $2 billion most argued was needed, many tempered their enthusiasm and questioned how strong the commitment really is.

We should, however, not limit our examination of this major development in social policy just to the dollars and cents, but also to what a national emphasis on child poverty really means in terms of social trends and values.

Children don't live in poverty alone...

When we talk about child poverty in Canada, we are almost exclusively referring to children who live in families. Children do not spontaneously appear in poverty. They are there because their parents are there. Why then do we not talk about family poverty, or just plain old poverty in general? The answer to that question says a lot about the direction of Canada's income support policies.

But they "deserve" our help...

One of the outgrowths of the war on the deficit, or perhaps more accurately a parallel phenomenon, was the stated intent of various levels of government to target benefits to those "genuinely in need." This trend is embodied most vividly in the 1993 Alberta welfare reforms which cut off welfare recipients who didn't take appropriate measures on their own behalf. This entire policy direction is based on an assumption that the denial of access to welfare will force people to take responsibility for themselves and get a job. If they choose not to get a job, or cannot find one, then they deserve to be destitute, or so the thinking goes. They are the undeserving poor.

While many Canadians, and certainly many Albertans, are prepared to accept harsh policies for adults, this "tough love" approach breaks down when applied to children. How can we possibly decide if children are deserving or undeserving? Are they in any way responsible for their situation? Do they deserve to starve because their parents are, in the opinion of social services, undeserving? The answer, to all but the hardest-headed is: of course not.

The political solution then becomes clear. Let's just help the children.

...but only if their parents are working.

Another significant feature of the national strategy is that it is geared to provide additional supports only to children in "working poor" families, not to the welfare poor. The reason given for this is to ease the transition to the workforce by bringing working poor supports up to the level received by welfare recipients.

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While this may legitimately be part of the motivation for this policy direction, it also again limits its commitment to the deserving poor. Those people who are working are really trying, the theory goes, so they deserve our help. The unstated message is that the welfare poor do not.

A dangerous trend

The idea that only those found to be deserving should be helped enjoys broad public support. At a time of increased emphasis on individual responsibility and limited public resources, it is an attractive idea. But as a policy trend, it is potentially dangerous.

Those of us who have worked directly with the poor know that it is never an easy thing to decide who has the capacity to help themselves and who does not. From a distance, it seems very clear: children and people with serious physical disabilities do not, able bodied people do. On closer inspection it can become very complex. Many people with physical disabilites are inherently more resilient and adaptable than say, a 25-year-old man with a history of mental illness or sexual abuse.

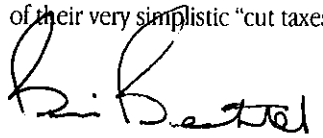
I'm not convinced that a modern forward-looking, compassionate society should ever deny access to safe food, clothing, and shelter, but if absolutely necessary, the decision to deny benefits should only be made on a case-by-case basis by professional social workers working through a carefully designed public protocol, with numerous checks built in.

By creating public policies which are based on some vague ideas about who deserves help and who does not, we make broad sweeping decisions, based more on the whims of editorial writers than on good social work. Human needs and capacities in a rapidly-changing society are never an easy thing to pin down and we take great risks when we assume from afar that this group should be able to cope on their own, but that group cannot. Public policy is a very blunt instrument and we should be concerned about who and how many people we are leaving outside the circle of deservedness.

Still, it's better than nothing

When the emphasis on child poverty became clear, many of us wrestled with these questions. It's my view that, while not the total commitment to ending poverty that many of us would have liked, the child benefit program is better than nothing. I believe that it's important to reaffirm the need for responses to poverty in general, and to support a child poverty strategy as an important first step.

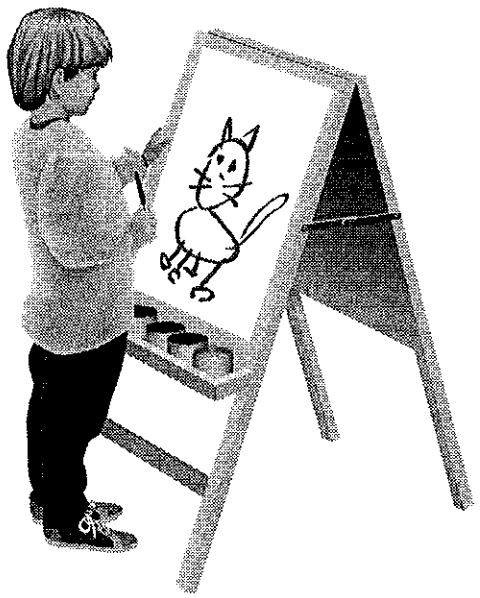
We should never, however, lose sight of what it means to shift our focus from poverty in general to a more specific focus on children. In my more optimistic moments, I can see the child poverty strategy as the first small swing of the pendulum back towards a more compassionate and supportive society, and the first evidence that those who advocate a more rugged individualistic approach are beginning to see some of the harsher dimensions of their very simplistic "cut taxes and everything will be fine" approach to social policy.



Brian Bechtel
Executive Director, Edmonton Social Planning Council

What about families on welfare?

By Bruce Hardy



Families on welfare deserve better treatment under the new arrangements for child benefits being negotiated by the federal, provincial and territorial governments, the National Council of Welfare says in a report entitled *Child Benefits: A Small Step Forward.*

The new arrangements are designed to direct increases in benefits to low-wage families, but not to families who rely on welfare as their main source of income. Families on welfare would get the same increases as low-wage families in the first instance, but the increases would be offset by decreases in their provincial or territorial welfare cheques. The money that the provinces and territories save on welfare would be "reinvested" in programs for low-income families who are not on welfare.

"We believe the clawback and reinvestment strategy should be a last resort rather than a preferred alternative," says the report. "We would much rather see any increases in federal child benefits retained by welfare families instead of being clawed back by provincial and territorial governments and reinvested in other programs."

The report takes issue with the notion implicit in the proposals that low-wage families deserve more support from governments and welfare families do not.

"The reality is that people on welfare—including the children in families on welfare—are among the poorest of the poor in Canada. The vast majority of recipients are on welfare because of circumstances well beyond their control—the loss of a job, the loss of a spouse or parent, or the loss of good health."

An overview of the child benefit proposals was published as part of the 1997 federal budget. Details of the new arrangements are to be negotiated by summer, and the federal government hopes to introduce enabling legislation by fall.

The National Council of Welfare describes the overall thrust of the reforms as promising, but has numerous concerns about some of the details in addition to concerns about the treatment of families on welfare:

The Size of the Increases. The federal government seems to be ahead of its timetable for eliminating the deficit and putting Ottawa's finances in good order. Given the success of the Minister of Finance, the National Council of Welfare is puzzled by the very modest level of support for child benefits announced in the 1997 budget speech.

Past reports by our group and other social policy groups have suggested that increased funding in the order of $2 billion a year is needed to make substantial inroads into child poverty. The 1997 budget speech set aside $600 million in new money for the 1998-99 fiscal year, plus the increase of $250 million a year announced in the 1996 budget speech for an eventual total increase of $850 million a year.

A Long-Term Federal Commitment. One issue that was not mentioned explicitly in the 1997 budget speech was a continuing commitment to further improvements in child benefits from the federal government. The budget speech described the 1998 version of the proposed Canada Child Tax Benefit as a "down payment," but it offered no clues about the kinds of increases that might be available further into the future.

No More Federal Cuts in Social Programs. If the federal government is truly committed to improving the lot of poor families with children, it should stop making cuts in the social programs that it supports directly or indirectly.

No More Provincial and Territorial Cuts. The National Council of Welfare believes any federal-provincial agreement on child benefits should include

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By Rosemarie Popham

Approaching the year 2000

Imagine a little toddler, clinging to the furniture, and moving one foot forward. But the other foot remains firmly anchored behind. Doting parents hold their breath. Only when both feet are firnily planted together can those parents celebrate "the first step."

Likewise when Mr. Martin announced, in his budget speech, the federal side of a joint federal-provincial strategy to reduce child poverty, we could only hold our breath.

The National Child Benefit System (NCBS)

The new Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) is the federal side of the national strategy. It integrates the old Work Income Supplement and Child Tax Benefit, and commits $850 million in the next two years to support children in low income families where parents are in the labour force.

In turn the provinces will reduce their spending for income for children by that same amount. They will then redirect the "freed up" money to services and supports that "prevent and reduce the depth of poverty, promote attachment to the workforce, and ensure that families will always be better off as a result of finding work."

This provincial "reinvestment strategy" and the Canada Child Tax Benefit are the two legs on which the National Child Benefit System (NCBS) will be built. But to date only the architects of the plan know what the reinvestment strategy will look like. What programs will qualify? And who will decide if a school lunch program is as good a reinvestment as a child care program? Will there be national standards, and who will enforce them? How will we be assured that the reinvestment strategy is not just a recycling strategy, essentially renaming funds already intended for children to make them appear new?

Critics argue that even the Canada Child Tax Benefit is not new money, but money announced for children in earlier budgets, such as for child care or for the work income supplement. This scepticism about the source of the funding and therefore the sincerity of governments emphasizes the need to establish a protected designated fund for children —what Campaign 2000 calls a Social Investment Fund for Children (SIF). A SIF would provide the same transparency and accountability that Canada has ensured for spending for seniors through CPP or EI for working-age adults. Surely, we can assure our children the same long term commitment that we provide for other vulnerable populations.

We could start by putting current expenditures in a SIF and then invest additional resources over time, moving us toward the $15 billion that Campaign 2000 projects will be required for a mature child poverty strategy.

Mr. Martin assured Canadians that the federal government will provide additional resources to the Canada Child Tax Benefit "as soon as we can afford it." When we can afford it is clearly a political decision. Leading up to the federal election, several parties promised tax cuts. They obviously assume we can afford them. Tax cuts are an interesting counterpoint to spending for children. Take the tax cut in Ontario. If this is extended to the rest of Canada, governments would essentially spend $16 billion, with the major benefits going to those with the highest incomes. Ironically this is the amount needed to end child poverty. When can we afford that?

The average poor child in Canada lives $4,000 below the poverty line. The most that any child can benefit from the Canada Child Tax Benefit is $600. And a child whose parents don't work for money cannot benefit at all.

NCBS is essentially an anti-welfare strategy, not a pro-child strategy. It is designed to help children whose parents work. But there is strong evidence that parental work

alone is not a magic wand for child poverty. Nearly 58 per cent of poor children live in families where a parent already works. The continuing poverty of so many children with parents in the labour market must ring an alarm bell. Work incentives may reduce child poverty if there are concomitant programs like increases in minimum wage, supports for housing, child support enforcement, job training and child care. As these programs fall in provincial jurisdiction, the jury must remain out until it is clear what the provinces will do with their "freed up" money.

NCBS will do nothing for the two out of five poor children who live in families for whom social assistance is the main source of income. Parents do not reject work because welfare is too attractive. It is not attractive to live on an average of $8,000 below the poverty line—for example, on $16,000 for a family of three in Toronto. Nor is there any empirical evidence that parents stay on social assistance when jobs are available.

If through NCBS, parents are assured that their children will not lose dental or health care, more of them may take low wage, low security jobs with long hours. Their working might even reduce the poverty of some children. And if that happens then the plan could be deemed a success for those families.

Many, however, will remain impoverished economically even when working. In this case, the NCBS must be deemed a failure. The goal must be to get children out of poverty, not just to get them off social assistance, no matter the cost.

Rosemarie Popham is the National Coordinator of Campaign 2000 which is a non-partisan coalition of national and community partners around the issue of child poverty. In 1989, the Parliament of Canada declared war on child poverty. The target date for its elimination was the year 2000. Campaign 2000 was organized shortly after this declaration.

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iron-clad guarantees against cuts in provincial or territorial welfare benefits of any kind. We further believe that the prohibition against cuts should apply to benefits for all welfare recipients, not just for welfare recipients with children.

Full Indexation of the Canada Child Tax Benefit. One of the worst features of the existing Child Tax Benefit is the lack of full protection against inflation. The benefit is partially indexed to the Consumer Price Index, but it increases only for inflation in excess of three per cent a year. Because of the partial indexing formula, the value of the benefit declined by nearly six per cent in the four years following its introduction. The loss in purchasing power on the basic benefit of $1,020 per child works out to $59 in 1997 alone.

The 1997 budget speech did not say whether the new Canada Child Tax Benefit would be fully indexed, partially indexed or not indexed at all.

Opening Closed Doors. One of the most disturbing and most unnecessary features of negotiations between the two levels of government on child benefits is the extreme secrecy that has characterized the opening months of the process.

Virtually everything was done behind closed doors. Outsiders had to guess at the kinds of options on the table, the scope of the negotiations, the timetable for steps along the way to the Canada Child Tax Benefit, and every other question of public policy associated with a significant shift in the way governments view benefits for children.

The National Council of Welfare believes that ordinary people have a right to know what kind of deals their elected representatives are making and what kind of reasonable alternatives exist. Armed with that kind of information, they have a right to make representations to their governments before new programs are set in stone.

Copies of *Child Benefits: A Small Step Forward* are available free of charge from the National Council of Welfare, 1010 Somerset Street West, 2nd Floor, Ottawa K1A 0J9. Telephone (613) 957-2963. Fax (613) 957-0680.

Bruce Hardy is the Executive Director of West Coast Family Resources and is on staff at Douglas College in Surrey B.C. He is the acting chairperson of the National Council of Welfare.

By Bill Maynes

Programs are not *enough*

As I drove to work this morning I listened with interest as a radio announcer reported some of the findings of a Statistics Canada study: Poor children are three times as likely as non-poor children to be in remedial classrooms, they are twice as likely to drop out of school and they are only half as likely to be in "gifted" programs. No surprises here. All of what the announcer said resonated with my experiences as an inner-city educator. Of course, it is not that poor children are less talented. That they do less well in school is simply an artifact of the many inequities they face in their young lives.

I believe that Canadians–including most Canadian politicians–know this, are concerned and genuinely want to help these children. Indeed, elected officials have introduced some important and useful poverty programs (most focusing on prevention and early intervention) aimed at helping poor children (the federal government's Brighter Futures initiative and Alberta's Early Intervention Program, for example). And these programs are helping poor children. At another time I might argue that the programs do not reach enough children and that some of the programs are not sufficiently intensive to provide the level of assistance needed. But that is not my purpose here. In fact, I want to begin by stating very clearly that these programs are essential and that they will help many poor children be more successful in Canadian society. We absolutely must continue to provide programming for children of poverty.

The "worry" that motivated this commentary is that Canadians may start to believe that, on its own, poverty programming will eradicate child poverty. Such an expectation is unrealistic. There are too many other forces in our society that ensure there will be a large number of poor children. To state the obvious: poor children live in poor families. And families are poor because they do not have sufficient income. If Canadians, particularly Canadian politicians, are serious about eliminating child poverty, they will have to do more than support programs to help individual children; they will have to address the circumstances that currently ensure that there are a large number of poor families in Canada. Unfortunately, however, many of the same circumstances that entrench poverty in our society are of great benefit to major corporations and to many wealthy and influential Canadians.

I am thinking here about the high rates of unemployment and under-employment that currently characterize the structure of work in Canada. Our unemployment rate holds at approximately 10 per cent, and another approximately 17 per cent of Canadians are under-employed, working in part time jobs with low pay and no or limited benefits. A very large number of Canadians are struggling to get any kind of work. This means that major corporations–Safeway is but one example–can plan into their staff complements a very large number of low paying part-time jobs. They can do so because there is a large pool of people who can find no other kind of work. This "good news" for corporations has contributed greatly to their achieving huge profits over the past few years. But it is bad news for ordinary Canadians. Major corporations simply have no motivation to create jobs that pay salaries capable of supporting middle class families. The function of corporations is to make the greatest profit possible, and they achieve this, in part, by keeping staff costs as low as possible. In the absence of government intervention, they will continue to pursue this strategy.

It is a strategy that has contributed to a dramatic redistribution of wealth in Canada. In the Spring 1997 edition of *Canadian Perspectives,* the Council of Canadians noted that "over the past 20 years, the share of income going to the top 30 per cent of income earners rose $14.3 billion," while "the bottom 30 per cent saw their incomes decline by about the same amount." We have been and are in the process of redistributing wealth

in Canada from low income earners to high income earners. So, despite current government rhetoric, we are moving toward a society with greater disparity between the rich and the poor, more poor families and more poor children.

It seems to me that there are only two ways that politicians can respond to this. They may continue to trust the corporate sector to care for all Canadians. The fundamental problem with this position is that, while corporations are very good at generating wealth, they are not at all good at redistributing wealth. The second kind of response would be to pursue fundamental changes in the structure of work in Canada, changes that I believe will require government intervention and regulation. But politicians who take this position are faced with conflicting pressures. Policies or regulations they may wish to introduce to change the structure of the work force by reducing unemployment and decreasing the dependency of major corporations on low paying part time work will not be popular with either wealthy Canadians or the corporate sector. And the money and power held by these groups have afforded them considerable political clout. It would take a brave Conservative or Liberal to risk the wrath of these groups. This brings me back to my "worry" which I will now state somewhat differently: Is it possible that politicians might use their support for poverty programming as a means of deflecting attention from structural problems they would rather not address?

Our governments seem to have the political will to help individual poor children. But do they have the political will to deal with the circumstances that have entrenched poverty in Canadian society? Or is the focus on programs for the children of poverty to serve merely as a convenient means of deflecting attention from broader societal problems? I guess part of my point is that we should temper our good feelings about having introduced programs that help individual children escape poverty with the realization that, at the same time, we are ignoring broader issues that entrench poverty in our society, thus ensuring that other children will replace them.

Bill Maynes is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta.

By Trevor Harrison

The poverty of Alberta's minimum wage legislation

Albertans hold several misconceptions regarding children living in poverty. One is that their families are welfare recipients. This is correct in some cases, but not all. As a recent study by the Edmonton Social Planning Council and Edmonton's Food Bank showed, a large number of food bank users have jobs. A lot of Alberta's poor are working poor who work long hours, at the expense of quality time with their children, just to keep the poverty line in sight.

A lot of poverty in Alberta today is a product of this province's wage structure. And a key part of this is Alberta's low minimum wage.

In April, Newfoundland's minimum wage rose from $5 to $5.25 per hour. This left Alberta with the lowest minimum wage in Canada ($5 per hour). The majority of Albertans earning the minimum wage are female (70 per cent); most are employed full-time (57 per cent); and nearly half (46 per cent) are 25 years or older.

Alberta's two main opposition parties—the Liberals and the New Democrats—have called for the minimum wage to be raised to $6 per hour. These calls have been echoed by labour unions and community leaders. Support for a raise is not unanimous, however. In particular, government officials, Labour Department officials, and many in the business community argue that increasing Alberta's minimum wage would damage Alberta's growing economy and ultimately cost jobs.

Why Arguments Against Raising the Wage Are Wrong

One argument against raising the minimum wage is that, because Alberta alone does not have a provincial sales tax, workers in Alberta actually have a higher take-home pay than workers in the other provinces. Upon reflection, this argument is quite curious. In effect, it says that the Alberta government subsidizes the wage costs of businesses by deferring taxes, and should continue to do so.

Opponents of raising the minimum wage offer several other interrelated arguments: 1) any raise in the minimum wage will increase unemployment, as some workers are laid-off or other workers not hired; 2) the increased cost of labour will be passed on to consumers who will in turn reduce their demand for the product, leading indirectly to production slowdowns and further unemployment; 3) for small firms, an increase in the minimum wage will place real wages above the competitive level, leading to business failure, a gradual shift in forms of ownership or the size of establishments, and (again) increased unemployment as workers are laid-off; and 4) raising the minimum wage raises salaries overall, creating unwanted inflation and (once again) unemployment.

Recent evidence suggests these arguments are fundamentally flawed. Card and Krueger's critically acclaimed recent book *Myth and Measurement: The New Economics of the Minimum Wage* shows (based on American data) that the effect of raising the minimum wage upon employment is generally neutral, and may even be positive. Similar results have been found by other researchers regarding the impact of minimum wages in Britain and Spain. In fact, as Blanchflower and Oswald show in their book, *The Wage Curve*, the relationship

generally between wages and unemployment is negative; that is, as wages increase, unemployment decreases. Why is this the case? In part, because increased wages provide an incentive to work. The larger reason, however, is the economically stimulative impact of high wage rates.

A major problem of Alberta's (and Canada's) economy in recent years has been a lag in consumer demand. Note, as a consequence, Alberta's extremely high rates of small business bankruptcy. Exports provide too narrow—and too volatile—a base upon which to build an economy. Raising the minimum wage, however, would stimulate consumer demand, ever the more so since low income earners are well known to spend proportionately more locally than high income earners. While a raise may drive a few employers out of business, the overall impact upon local businesses would be positive.

As for inflation, the amount stimulated by a raise of $1-$2 per hour would be small. The "ripple effect" would be largest for workers closest to the minimum, decreasing sharply thereafter. Moreover, there is a growing body of theory that suggests some inflation may even be economically beneficial.

Finally, there is the question of the "Alberta Advantage." Ignoring the term's nebulous—meaningless?—quality, we might nonetheless ask how Alberta is to retain a competitive workforce when its neighbouring provinces, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, have set their minimum wage rates at $5.60 and $7 respectively? Quality workers will not long remain in a province that neither rewards nor respects them.

Poverty and the Minimum Wage

It is sometimes said that the minimum wage is an inefficient policy instrument for combating poverty and economic inequality. Certainly, it cannot lead the fight alone.

Nonetheless, the minimum wage does make some contribution towards alleviating poverty amongst the employed poor. It sets a social minimum, thereby protecting workers (and their families) from the impact of cutthroat competition based on declining wages.

Alberta's *average* wage is high. This fact, however, hides the reality of two increasingly polarized economies: one tied to export markets, the other local markets. Workers toiling in the latter market are the ones who would most benefit from a raise in Alberta's minimum wage.

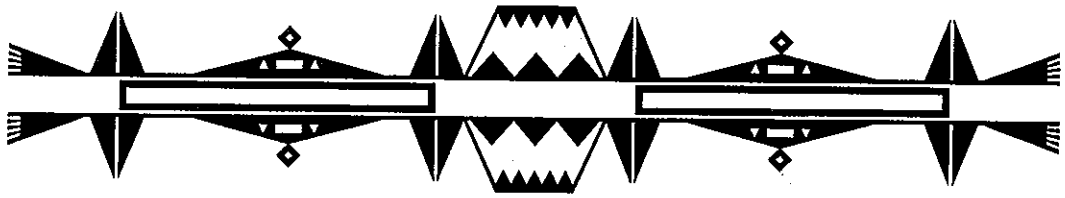
This should be increased immediately to $6 per hour, with an increase over the next year to $6.50 per hour. Economically, Alberta can afford the increase. Politically, also, the time is right for an increase. Raising the minimum wage would not directly draw from government coffers or require an increase in taxation. And raising the minimum wage is in keeping with the government's efforts since 1993 to get people off welfare and into active employment.

Of course, raising the minimum-wage is not the total answer to child poverty. It would, however, be a good start.

Trevor Harrison is Research Associate of the Parkland Institute.

Taken to extremes: conditions of Aboriginal children

By Russel Barsh



The Prime Minister often boasts of Canada's top ranking in the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), an annual composite indicator of member states' real GDP (gross domestice product) per capita, life expectancy at birth, adult literacy and school enrolment. He does not mention the fact that the UN's 1994 *Human Development Report* noted the socioeconomic gulf between Canada's Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians—or that the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child recently expressed concern over the poverty in which many Aboriginal and other Canadian children struggle to survive in the midst of relative plenty.

Aboriginal children, on the whole, remain extremely vulnerable to disease, disability, violence, and institutionalization, nearly all of which is preventable. These conditions have roots in the past failure of Canada to observe its treaties. Alberta First Nations opened their lands to settlers in exchange for promises of partnership, respect and economic opportunities which were never fully kept.

The historical exchange

Some Albertans seem to think that Canada has been too generous to Aboriginal people. In actuality, the value of the lands and resources acquired from First Nations far exceeds the reinvestment in Aboriginal health, education, development and social programs. In the 1990s, for example, more than $8 billion in petroleum alone flowed each year from wells drilled on lands acquired by treaty in Alberta. During the same period, total federal and provincial expenditures on Aboriginal people in Alberta was about $650 million per year—of which 97 per cent was in general programs such as Alberta Health to which they were entitled as citizens regardless of their Aboriginal ancestry. (This disproportion was greater in the 1980s, and greater still in earlier decades.)

On average, Ottawa and the provinces spend about 50 per cent more on each Aboriginal person than each non-Aboriginal Canadians but this is mainly because Aboriginal people are much more likely to be poor.

Economic and social conditions

In 1991, the most recent census year for which statistics are yet available, Aboriginal people received about half the per capita income of other Canadians. A larger proportion of Aboriginal people live in remote areas where goods and services are considerably more costly, so the difference in *purchasing power* is even greater.

Nationwide, 25 per cent of the Aboriginal people who seek work are unsuccessful. Aboriginal poverty and unemployment in Alberta tend to be a little below the national average for Aboriginal people, however. On the Blood Reserve, for instance, unemployment is nearly 50 per cent. Aboriginal people who move to Alberta cities do not fare much better. In Lethbridge, Aboriginal unemployment is roughly 40 per cent, compared to 4.2 per cent for other city residents.

Economic statistics don't tell the whole story of the toll of poverty on Aboriginal children's lives, however. An Aboriginal child is still twice as likely to die in infancy as other Canadian children, far more likely to miss school days due to serious or chronic illness and more likely to become disabled by disease or trauma.

Consider diabetes. This potentially disabling metabolic disorder is relatively rare among Canadians, affecting fewer than three per cent of adults. Health Canada estimates its incidence among Aboriginal people at six to eight per cent, but recent surveys in southern Alberta suggest that as many as one-fourth of treaty Indians are affected. This is consistent with evidence from other North American Indian groups that adult-onset diabetes (Type II or NIDDM) is growing to epidemic proportions. Diets heavy on flour, cooking fats and sugary soft drinks, but lacking fresh fruits and vegetables, appear to be a contributing factor.

Diet is also implicated in sharply rising rates of heart disease among Aboriginal peoples throughout Canada, as well as the prevalence of chronic respiratory disease among Aboriginal children. It would be fair to say that most of the debilitating conditions suffered by young Aboriginal people are preventable with adequate income and nutrition.

Trauma (accidents and violence) is an indicator of social stress, as well as physical conditions of life such as the condition of roads and housing. Aboriginal people nationwide are three times more likely to die from trauma than other Canadians. In Alberta, it's six times the highest rate for any group in any province. To put this figure in context it means that an Alberta Indian or Metis is more likely to die violently than to die from cancer or heart disease. Consider how this affects the worldview of Aboriginal children!

In Alberta, much as in the other provinces, Aboriginal people are several times more likely to be incarcerated than other Canadians, and this mainly for acts of frustration, boredom or anger. In Lethbridge, where Aboriginal people are four per cent of the population, they account for an estimated 25-30 per cent of all police contacts, arguably due in large part to suspicion, mistrust, and targeted surveillance not only by police but by storekeepers and neighbours. Children learn early to expect harassment and failure; play groups tend to become ethnically segregated by ages six to eight. Economic marginalization is reinforced by the routine experience of stigmatization.

Marginality and the child

There has been another kind of social toll on Aboriginal peoples. Programs aimed at combatting "backwardness" and poverty have sometimes intensified the erosion of families and cultures. Residential schools—many of which were still in operation here 25 years ago—were aimed at separating children from the influences of their families, breaking their languages and cultures. The authoritarianism of the schools had a profound adverse effect on pupils' self-respect, and on the way they are raising their own children today. Many Alberta reserves describe themselves as still being "in recovery" from that experience.

But the greater tragedy may have begun more recently, as a result of the expansion of provincial child welfare services. Although data on ethnic origin were not routinely kept, it is generally agreed today that Aboriginal children were far more likely to be placed in adoptive care outside Aboriginal communities. (In the United States, where the same policy was pursued, an estimated one-fifth of all Native children were removed from their communities in the 1950s and 1960s.) It would be surprising if the rate of removal were not higher in Alberta, where eugenics and Anglo-Christian nativism were embraced from the 1920s to 1950s. Many of my students are just now discovering their Aboriginal ancestry.

In 1989, Canada signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms the "desirability of continuity of a child's upbringing" and respect for the child's ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious identity. Neither Ottawa nor Edmonton have taken steps to apply this principle to Aboriginal children, despite their over-representation on family-services and youth court dockets.

Although Aboriginal children are barely five per cent of the total population in Alberta, they comprise roughly one-half of all children in care in our province. This means that an Aboriginal child in Alberta is 10 times more likely to be placed under some kind of public supervision because of homelessness, extreme poverty, neglect, or abuse. Aboriginal youth are also far more likely to "get into trouble," further reducing their chances for education or employment.

Prognosis

It is a tribute to the strength of indigenous cultures and family supports that many children thrive and succeed at all under conditions of such disproportionate deprivation, ill-health, and state intrusion. Ottawa and Edmonton are not helping matters by "downloading" the costs and responsibilities of Aboriginal social development at a time when—as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concluded—the long-term economic impacts of Aboriginal marginalization on Canadian society far exceed the added investment required to reverse the situation over the next 25 years.

Alberta is still flush with revenues from petroleum, forestry and farming. Competition in primary production is intensifying within the rapidly globalizing marketplace, however, and Alberta will need to put greater emphasis on technology and creativity. It remains to be seen whether Aboriginal people will be given the chance to contribute fully to Alberta's economic transformation, through the renewal of the full creative potential of their own cultures.

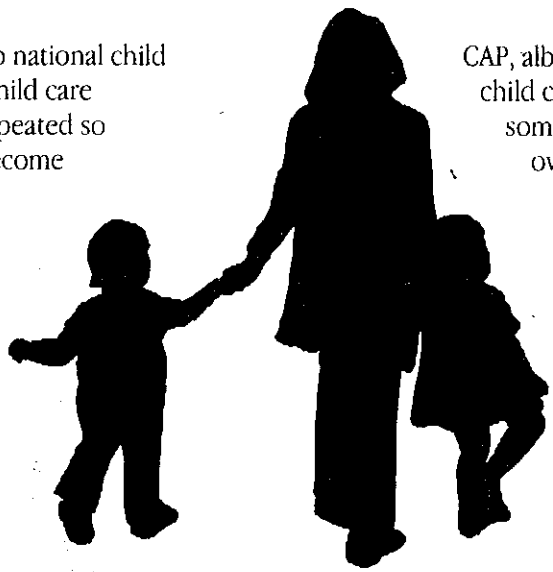
Russel Lawrence Barsh is Associate Professor of Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge. He worked previously at the United Nations as an advocate for indigenous peoples, and among other assignments wrote a critical statistical study of social inequality in Canada for the United Nations Development Programme in 1993. Relevant Publications include "Canada's Aboriginal Peoples: Social Integration or Disintegration," Canadian Journal of Native Studies 14:1-46 (1994). *His study "Chronic Health Effects of Dispossession and Dietary Change" will appear this summer in* Medical Anthropology.

By Martha Friendly

Child care:

Hostage to the demands of the new politics

The observation that Canada has no national child care program and that delivery of child care services is a patchwork has been repeated so often, and for so long, that it has become banal. Canadian child care has been described in this way for more than 25 years through Liberal and Conservative regimes, through Royal Commissions, Task Forces, Parliamentary and Senate Committees, and United Nations Declarations and Conventions. Although our child care situation never began to approach adequacy, there was, through the 1970s and 1980s, slow but steady improvement in regulations, funding, training, range of services and availability across much of Canada.



As Canada approaches the new millennium, however, reductions in federal funding and federal withdrawal from social policy, together with provincial downsizing and privatization have induced a new child care crisis. For the first time, child care is no longer making gains; it is, instead, losing ground.

The Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) announced in the 1996 budget, symbolizes child care's standing in Canadian social policy. Child care has never had a "home"; it has been treated variously as a welfare service, a tool to support employability, a women's issue, a child development service, both for children at risk and all children and a business expense. The Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), Canada's last cost-shared program, was, since 1966, the sole mechanism through which the federal government contributed to regulated child care. It treated child care as an appendage within a welfare framework until it was eliminated in 1996. CAP did permit open-ended spending for eligible child care expenditures, did encourage provincial spending with the "carrot" of a federal return of 50 cents and did require cost-shared funds to be spent on regulated, not-for-profit services. CAP, albeit too limited to really build a child care system, nevertheless ensured some measure of accountability and, over the years, helped regulated child care in Canada to grow and be maintained.

The CHST has none of these features. Although there is an outstanding federal commitment to develop principles, this has not happened. As a block fund encompassing health care, post-secondary education and social welfare, the CHST neither elicits provincial cost-sharing nor includes mechanisms for accountability. At the same time, two other federal initiatives combine to help shape child care's current situation: first, the announcement in the 1996 throne speech that the federal government will not create new national programs in areas of provincial jurisdiction without agreement of a majority of provinces. Second, the new CHST has been subjected to massive federal cuts—$7 billion by 1998—intensifying already-ongoing reductions in social spending. This fiscal trend and its culmination in the CHST, together with the provincial penchant for downsizing and privatization, have situated provincial health, education and social programs in a downward financial spiral with hospital closures, women's shelter closures and public service layoffs.

It is generally acknowledged that, while block funding may be appropriate for maintaining an already-established program like Medicare, it is clearly inappropriate for creating a new program like child care. It seems that if child care's "home" within CAP could be visualized as a very modest cabin with patched-up walls and a leaky roof, child care's "home" in the CHST is like a shanty-dweller's "squat" on turf belonging to someone else. This is not a position of strength from which to create a new national program.

Today, child care's dwindling, mostly market-oriented, funding arrangements ensure that even existing services across most of Canada are plagued by ever-increasing fragility. In the provinces, the federal withdrawal has contributed to provincial policy environments in which "anything goes." Child care is in crisis not only through radical attacks like those in Ontario, but less blatantly in provinces whose child care situations are more fragile (like Newfoundland and PEI and Manitoba, with its traditionally strong situation. The usual indicators of growth, expansion and stability of child care services—the number of spaces, number of subsidies, maintenance of operating and capital funds—all show erosion. Nationally, growth in regulated spaces has been lower in the past few years than it had been since 1983; five provinces actually lost spaces last year and an equal number had a reduced number of subsidies; nine of 12 jurisdictions eliminated, reduced or froze operating/wage grants in the past few years. Some provinces reduced (or proposed reducing) standards, and monitoring and enforcement of regulations declined. Concerns about increasing emphasis on targeting and fragmentation of funding and services abound in the child care community in most provinces.

Where does this situation leave Canadian child care? A growing number of sectors believe that it is in their interest, and in the public interest, to have a strong child care/early childhood development system. If high quality child care/early childhood education is important and an investment in the future, how will child care in Canada develop and be maintained? Child care can provide an excellent example—a test case—to determine whether Canada will be able to resolve issues of national importance in the 21st century. If the problem of child care cannot be resolved, what future is there for other social policy issues like health care, or environmental or labour force matters? The next year or two will be critical in determining how, and whether, appropriate mechanisms develop. Meanwhile, how long will we—children, parents, employers—and those who care about the nature of our future society wait?

Martha Friendly is the coordinator of Childcare Resource and Research Centre in Toronto. This article also appears in the April 1997 issue of Vision for the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

By Suzette C. Chan

Re: source Readings

Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century
By James E. Cote & Anton L. Allahar
Stoddart, 1994
164 pp; $18.95

Child poverty skirmishes condemn a generation

During the economic boom of the 1960s, U. S. President Lyndon Johnson inspired widespread support for a War on Poverty. In Canada, Prime Minister Lester Pearson found support amongst Canadians to create a broad-based social net to address inequality through initiatives such as the Canada Pension Plan, a universal medicare system and the establishment of the Department of Regional Economic Expansion.

In 1997, the war on poverty has been reduced to isolated skirmishes on a greatly narrowed field. As government purse strings tightened over the past 15 years, and as public sympathy for the less fortunate becomes increasingly strained, charity has become reserved only for "blameless" victims of poverty, namely children. If funds are found, they will be devoted to narrow, politically popular interventions targeting children in poverty.

The problem with this selective dispensation of charity is that it encourages programs designed to put out brush fires, and precludes efforts to attack the core issues that contribute to the poverty of an individual child, her family and the society in which she lives.

In recent months, there has been much evidence to support the case that the most effective intervention approaches are those which focus on the context in which a child grows up. In April, Statistics Canada released a report which concluded that "(c)hildren whose families were in the top 20 per cent of socio-economic status scores were considered to be in the highest (academic) group. Those in the bottom 20 per cent were in the lowest group."

A recently published four-part series in *The Globe and Mail* reinforces the StatsCan data. The series detailed examples of early intervention programs which have found success by helping parents build healthy, nurturing environments for their children with strategies such as setting up community kitchens and conducting anger management training for parents under social and financial stress.

Arguments for a societal, as opposed to an individualistic, "blame the victim" approach to poverty can also be found in *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* by University of Western Ontario professors James E. Cote and Anton L. Allahar. *Generation on Hold* paints an alarming picture of the kind of world we are forcing our children to grow up in, a world which values market demands over education, commodity over identity and low-wage labour pools over skills development.

Cote and Allahar prefigure the Statistics Canada data on income level as a determiner of academic success with a phenomenon they term "educational inflation." The authors observe that the nature of the work now open to young people is increasingly tied to the level of education they attain. This may have been somewhat justifiable when public funding for post-secondary education was such that a lower-middle income family could afford to support a child through university, but when tuition rates have increased 100 per cent in five years, educational inflation means children from poor families are excluded from a primary means by which to raise their standard of living.

In 1911, when agricultural jobs accounted for 38 per cent of all jobs, young people could leave school in their mid-teens, pursue work on the family farm, perhaps marry and start a family of their own. But by 1986, agricultural jobs accounted for just four per cent of all jobs in Canada. The economy had shifted into what Cote and Allahar refer to

as an "advanced industrial" economy. Manufacturing jobs held at a steady 16 per cent of the work force, but there was an explosion in the service, professional and clerical sectors. These were jobs, particularly at the management level of the service sector and all levels of the professional and clerical sectors, routinely require that candidates have post-secondary education, even when the work does not warrant higher education.

"[F]or most jobs the amount of academic training currently required is either unnecessary or irrelevant.... The primary reason for keeping students in school for longer periods of time is not, therefore, to ensure that they are better trained," they write. "The sequestering protects the economic community from disruptions that might occur if young people were idle and it keeps them out of the labour force until they are needed."

What is left for young people are menial jobs for which they are paid minimum wage. At that, some employers mete out a minimal number of hours to avoid paying employee benefits, and to keep their junior workforce dispensable. What is most disturbing to Cote and Allahar is that this type of work has been informally reserved for young people, so that young workers are ghettoized in low-skilled jobs which offer little chance of internal advancement (you need a degree for that), and which isolate them from the benefits of an adult mentor. The flip side is that adults in this environment are increasingly alienated from teenagers, a factor in their rising rate of distrust of teenagers.

Fueling this wariness of young people is the destabilization many adults feel in their own lives. Layoffs, job shifts and redefinitions of social roles have left many adults to question their own sense of identity at a time when they are expected to be fully actualized, mature citizens. "As the identity of adult members becomes ambiguous, they are less able to guide the young through the self-discovery process that is an integral part of forming an identity," Cote and Allahar write. Young people are left to fend for themselves in an environment which offers a narrow range of options, many of which benefit the adult status quo.

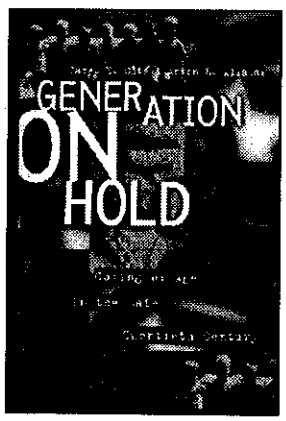
For example, North American business interests are well served by a conventional, polarized gender structure. There are market implications in the pressure for girls to act in a "feminine" manner: North American girls collectively spend billions of dollars annually on cosmetics and other beauty services. Because of this, our society has been slow to break down the gender barriers, an important aspect of identity development. One of the tragic results is that girls, who tend to score higher than boys in early grade years, are still subtly and not so subtly, being steered to this "feminine" identity which can compromise their interest in school, and thus in their future earning potential.

The image of the strong, silent type of male is also still very persistent. Boys who do not measure up to these restrictive roles may channel their frustrations through anti-social behaviour, such as acts of violence or transgressions of the law. Sometimes boys' collective behaviour is coded in the media as "gang activity", which is further divided along ethnic lines. Cote and Allahar take exception to this view of teen behaviour. The over-focus on youth gangs is a strategy to divide youth, ensuring young people do not unite to represent their interests in public policy debates.

The youth movement of the 1960s brought about radical changes that benefited young people born during the post-war baby boom: a lowered voting age of 18, increased funding to post-secondary institutions, a new perspective on the purpose of military interventions, the advancement of the civil rights, feminist and gay rights agendas. But if youth today do not exhibit the same communitarian zeal, the fault may lie not at their feet, but firmly in the hands of a society that is more interested in dividing youth into black and white, rich and poor.

Cote and Allahar are fond of quoting from George Orwell's *1984* and Aldus Huxley's *Brave New World,* and like those dystopic novels, *Generation on Hold* does read as both a diagnosis of our societal values and a warning of where those values may take us. The key to ensuring future generations of socially engaged citizens lies not in stopgap skirmishes, but rather in an all-out effort to build a vibrant, healthy and egalitarian society.

Suzette C. Chan is an Edmonton writer. She is also the Administrative Assistant at the Edmonton Social Planning Council.



By Joanne Helmer

Lethbridge and area feeling the *pain* of poverty

The poverty experienced by higher numbers of children in southern Alberta is leading to thefts in school, vandalism, school dropouts, a deep anger and the same sense of hopelessness their parents feel. In the Crowsnest Pass, it may be contributing to teenage suicides.

Each agency trying to deal with the problems of poverty in the south, even schools who run into it while teaching children, have their own stories. But the message is always the same: more and more working people are slipping into poverty, families trying to live on welfare programs don't get enough money to survive and the long-term poor have given up hope. While the statistics are not always available to compare, Jenny Skinner, director of one of two food banks in Lethbridge that have the highest utilization rates in the province, says the need started to "explode" about three years ago.

"In the past five years," says the manager of Harbor House, a woman's shelter in Lethbridge, "there has been a dramatic change in the ability of many families to provide for themselves and their children. Just meeting the daily needs is a struggle," says Vedna McGill. "Five years ago, they felt a bit of optimism. They were willing to take on challenges at school or take a job at the bottom and work up. Now they feel it doesn't matter which way they go, they can't make it," she says.

Children feel the stress both from their parents and in their own lives. Neither their material needs for food and clothing nor their emotional needs are being met by overwhelmed parents who are worried about paying next month's rent. Julie Kissick, who is in charge of a day-time drop-in program associated with the city's homeless shelter, says anger is the biggest problem among the youth. "Nothing the kids are dealing with is fair. Life's not fair for them. They're angry and then they become violent. We're already seeing it in the high schools."

"They're always getting hand-me-down clothes from the second-hand store and leftover food from the food bank. They live with second-hand furniture. It instills a second-class mentality. It tells them they're less than other people," she says.

Many of the people in the agencies talked about the pressure on young people to look a certain way and eat certain foods if they're going to fit in with other children. "I think the poverty is why we have so much theft in the schools," says Kissick. There's so much peer pressure and it starts really young—to look a certain way. Even teachers respond to the way the kids are dressed. So they feel they've gotta have that stuff."

Barb Cavers, principal of Senator Buchanan Elementary School in Lethbridge says the pressure for the "nifty" snacks has led to stealing in the earliest grades. "The pressure on very young kids to be consumers is incredible. It's tough for them to deal with it when it's flashed in front of them on a daily basis." Cavers estimates 20 to 25 per cent of the children in her school are experiencing serious problems related to poverty. That is higher than most schools in Lethbridge, and much higher than most schools in the region where principals are beginning to notice more problems.

But nifty snacks and up-to-date clothing are not the only material goods missing. Even good nutrition, which is essential to the ability to learn, is not available to these children on a regular basis. Kissick says it's not the fault of the food banks because they have to work with what they have and some of the obvious foods missing from a food bank diet are fresh fruits and vegetables.

Only three schools, all in Medicine Hat, provide a daily lunch program for children, where fees can be waived for financial necessity. None of the Lethbridge schools or those in the area offer lunch programs, although a Lethbridge woman is conducting a survey to determine the need for one. Jackie Speakman says many teachers and principals are interested because of what they're seeing but sometimes the principals say they're not interested out of a fear of adding to the teachers' workload.

Medicine Hat Food Bank, perhaps coincidentally, did not experience an increase in the number of children in the families it helped between 1993 and 1997, although the overall numbers rose there too. But in Medicine Hat, most families do not experience long-term poverty like they are suffering in the rest of the south. Manager Vicki Thomy says only two per cent went to the food bank between eight and 14 times. It has to be pointed out that while Lethbridge food banks serve a large surrounding area, roughly 55,000 of the 175,000 population in the area are more likely to be served by the Mormon church, which provides its own welfare program.

This reliance on the helping agencies in Lethbridge and area, necessary as it is, is having its own impact. The family services supervisor for Salvation Army in Lethbridge says kids are developing an unhealthy dependence on the system. "When they go with their parents to the food bank, they think of it as the grocery store. They think it's normal, " says Rande Ross. Their parent's inability to cope with life also means the children are not learning basic skills. "They often don't know how to put a meal together from what we give them in the hamper. In the summer, when we can give them fresh vegetables, they don't know what to do with them. The most popular thing for them is doughnuts and bread, anything to fill their stomach quickly. "

Child poverty is more than the lack of food, says Jock Carpenter, manager of the Interfaith Food Bank in Lethbridge. "Children experience all kinds of hunger—for love and protection as well as food."

A United Church minister in the Crowsnest Pass fears neglect of those other needs might be contributing to what she calls an "appalling" rate of suicide. The Pass has the highest rate of suicide in Southern Alberta. Terry Scallon says in the last six months, five people took their lives, including three teenagers. She has sensed a deterioration in the ability of people to feed their families even in the two years she's lived there. This coupled with the rate of suicide and attempted suicides multiplies the stress within the community.

Joanne Helmer is a reporter for the Lethbridge Herald—a daily newspaper in Lethbridge.

Upcoming events

GMCC introduces a certificate for home and community based rehabilitation

For the first time ever in Western Canada... Grant MacEwan College presents Home and Community Based Rehabilitation Certificate—Level 1.

For those persons who work or live with persons having *Acquired Brain Injury*. Developed by the Ontario Brain Injury Association, this course will be facilitated by Barry Willer Ph. D. Dr. Willer is Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at the State University of New York at Buffalo and Adjunct Professor at Brock University.

The course will be offered at Grant MacEwan College's City Centre Campus in Edmonton, Alberta and will run from August 11-14, 1997. For more information and registration please call the college at (403) 497-5117 or fax to 497-5116 or e-mail to macleans@admin.gmcc.ab.ca.

By Shelley Russell

Teachers confronted daily by poverty-related student problems

In 1989, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) published *Children, Schools and Poverty*, a paper detailing the impact of child poverty on schooling and describing model intervention programs. Since then, as both an advocacy organization and a partner in Campaign 2000, the CTF has continued to lobby the federal government to take action on child poverty.

Now, the Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA) has stepped into the arena with an advocacy handbook for school boards interested in doing something about the 1.5 million children in our country who live in poverty. *Students in Poverty: Toward Awareness, Action, and Wider Knowledge* emerged from the CSBA's 1996 annual general meeting, at which school trustees unanimously endorsed the elimination of child poverty in Canada.

In her preface to the handbook, CSBA president Donna Cansfield points out that child poverty cannot be addressed in isolation from family poverty. "The students in our schools are children living within families. Poverty is a family issue, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the concern for students living in poverty from the concern for their families. School boards are charged with responsibility for students and schools, and we recognize that education is one of the services provided by and to the community. Those involved with education must of necessity be advocates for the community," she writes.

Helping school boards become advocates for the community is what *Students in Poverty* is all about. It is "a call to arms on behalf of children, those members of our society whose voices are seldom heard or heeded by the powerful, but whose needs we in the education sector see only too often."

The handbook begins by noting that child poverty has increased, not decreased, since the House of Commons passed its unanimous resolution to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000. In 1989, 15.3 per cent of Canadian children lived in poverty; by 1995, that figure had risen to 21 per cent (21.7 per cent in Alberta).

"We doubt that it is possible to eradicate child poverty within the three years remaining in our government's target, but we also know that, by working together, we can make a major dent in the issue," Cansfield writes.

The handbook stresses that poverty is often behind a host of school-related problems, including delayed cognitive development, lower achievement, low self-esteem and self-confidence, difficult behavior and interrupted school attendance. Indeed, figures from the Canadian Institute of Child Health cited in the handbook indicate that children from low-income families are more than $2^1/_2$ times more likely to drop out of school than children from middle- and high-income families.

In short, children from low-income families are often ill equipped to take full advantage of the public-education system. They have equality of access but not equality of outcome.

School boards can help promote equality of outcome by assessing and adjusting their policies to ensure that they do not adversely affect students in poverty, the handbook suggests. Boards can also help by offering those students more challenging rather than less challenging programs, making sure that young women finish high school, keeping school facilities open so that the students are not disadvantaged by their lack of resources at home, ensuring that their parents are well represented on school councils and integrating children's services.

In addition to promoting local solutions, the handbook encourages boards to lobby federal, provincial and

Continued on page 24—School

What churches can do about child poverty

By Don Mayne

Most churches in Canada have Sunday School, Scouts, C.G.I.T. (Canadian Girls In Training), Guides, youth groups, etc. and we are justifiably proud of the good influences these programs have on children and youth.

But recently at church we sang a hymn by Jim Strathdee who writes about what we were "meant to do and be ... to find the lost and lonely one, to heal the broken soul with love, to feed the hungry children with warmth and good food, to feel the earth below, the sky above!" ("I am the Light of the World" by Jim Strathdee in *Songs for a Gospel People*, 1987.)

If the Church is faithful to its mission it will be aware of the issues of child poverty in the city around us.

Child poverty is not really about children, but, as Chris Axworthy, the NDP Member of Parliament from Saskatoon points out, it is about the financial situation of the whole family, and their housing, employment, security, educational opportunities, etc. (*Saturday Night*, November 1996, P. 33,34).

The poverty of the parents is the basic cause of child poverty. To help children who live in poverty, churches need to carefully consider how to help the whole family.

Churches should look at the level of family income after the cuts of the past few years. Does social assistance provide sufficient money for the necessities of life, let alone any of the options? People on social assistance told the Quality of Life Commission in 1995 that their income has been pared so much that it is impossible to pay the rent and feed a family, let alone provide for school fees, sports, etc.

Child poverty affects children in homes where parents can find work only part-time or at very low wages. The minimum wage in Alberta does not provide enough to support a family, even if the parent works full time. Churches can lobby governments to raise the minimum wage to a decent level.

Many low income parents are limited in the jobs they can accept because of the difficulty of finding adequate child care while they work. Canada needs more government support for realistic child care options.

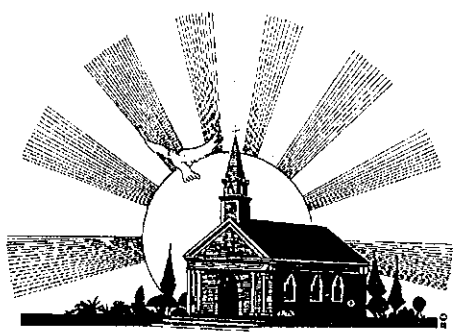
Governments have begun to recognize that single parent families may be forced to live in poverty because spouses renege on child support payments. Programs which are intended to help collect support payments are not always effective, and the children suffer. Churches can become informed about this situation, and press governments for improvements in the collection of child support payments.

These suggestions are primarily about churches lobbying governments for improvements in government programs. But churches can deal with some of these situations themselves by:

- providing facilities for quality child care;
- providing volunteers for literacy programs so parents can upgrade themselves and qualify for better paying jobs;
- encouraging church members who employ people at minimum wage to voluntarily increase the level of pay and to hire people full-time whenever possible;
- encouraging non-custodial parents to make their child support payments;
- providing volunteers to work with children with learning needs; and
- supporting school hot lunch programs, etc.

But perhaps the most significant contribution churches could make to dealing with child poverty would simply be to get church people talking about it. For too long churches, as a reflection of the communities in which they exist, have largely ignored the problems. But it isn't true that problems you don't acknowledge thereby go away. Child poverty may never be totally erased, but we certainly can't expect any improvement unless we become aware of the people involved and realize that we have some responsibility for the suffering that they face.

Don Mayne is a Commissioner of the Quality of Life Commission which prepared the report "Listen To Me" after meeting with 21 community groups affected by the government's cutbacks. He is a retired public servant and United Church minister and is active in numerous seniors and interfaith groups in Edmonton and the province.



Maybe even lawyers can change...things

By Dale Cunningham

It should be argued that anyone, and especially a lawyer, who genuinely wants to work towards serving the needs of people who are poor take a hard look at the reality of poverty in our society. One would hasten to add that understanding this reality is probably not, strictly speaking, required in order to aid the poor. A realistic view of the roots of societal poverty and what is required for change, however, can help a lawyer or anyone else understand better what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what direction their efforts must take.

Despite clamouring to the contrary by some who seek to advance their interests upon the backs of the less powerful, poverty is not inevitable, poverty is not the result of indolence and lack of personal merit. In the end poverty, as a societal phenomenon, perseveres simply because its existence serves the interests of some of those who are not poor. In today's climate of ideas many of us who are not poor, of course, do not believe this. And no wonder, in the current political context fiscal conservatism goes hand in hand with blaming the poor for their plight. It is as if we are to believe that people are poor solely on the basis of personal defects and failings. We are led to believe that if some are poor it does not affect the rest of us, that a certain level of poverty is unavoidable, and that even if possible it would cost too much to eliminate poverty anyway.

As a social condition poverty will not be ended by those who are not poor. Poverty will be ended, if it can be stopped, by the poor, by dint of their self-organization and action, political or otherwise. Those of us who want to help the poor must put our efforts to helping them organize themselves.

This may not be how we tend to think about use of our skills in aid of the poor. It is certainly not how a lawyer would typically think of using his or her skills. In many ways it would be contradicting some basic principles of the legal profession. Lawyers are supposed to help solve legal problems in the context of an individual relationship between lawyer and client. This may work well for the middle-class client whose legal problem is an aberration in their lives, whose problem is not a product of their "middle-classness." Poor people do not have legal problems in the conventional sense, their problems are largely a function of their poverty. For a lawyer to solve their problem, assuming they have access to legal aid or have the money to pay, is to simply treat the symptom of poverty and create a dependence on specialized expensive advice. For once the case is over the lawyer will be gone and the situation little changed, win or lose.

Of course this is not to say the lawyer's specialized training is of no use. And this is not to trivialize the efforts of those dedicated lawyers who, often working for free, take on test cases in order to bring about legal reform. Knowledge of the law and professional advocacy skills can be of great help—especially if used to help poor people organize themselves to create social conditions where grinding poverty is not their norm.

Few need convincing of the debilitating effects of poverty or the detrimental effect poverty has on political participation. Most poor people do not vote and are not politically active, so it should not be surprising that most mainstream politicians and the parties they represent are generally unresponsive to the poor as a political constituency.

That is not to say the poor do not have defenders and benefactors (anti-poverty groups, agencies, certain writers, etc.). They advocate and work tirelessly to promote the cause of people who are poor— to represent their interests in the political and social arenas. Collectively, advocates catalogue the inequities and present policy alternatives that may change conditions. Convincing arguments are made showing the lunacy of allowing short term economic calculus to justify casting a significant number in our society adrift.

But all of the support of defenders and benefactors may not be enough without the political participation of the poor themselves. In less democratic times when bread ran short the poor revolted, that was the measure of their political participation. Today, to be paid in attention what they are worth by politicians, the poor must vote and do so en masse. The poor must organize...and the rest of us should help.

Dale Cunningham is a law student at the University of Alberta. Parts of this article were written for a poverty law class which examined the role of lawyers in promoting social change.

Head Start in Edmonton

By Deborah Hopkins and Avril Pike

Head Start programs give economically disadvantaged children a chance to succeed in school and in life. Head Start is a recognized program model that has been successfully implemented in the United States for 30 years, and is quickly becoming established in Canada. In Edmonton there are five agencies currently delivering Head Start programs at several community-based locations throughout the city.

Head Start is unique because it is a multi-faceted intervention that serves the family as well as the child—and that's the key to its success.

Early intervention provided through Head Start is important because disadvantaged preschool children may have delays, or be at risk for delays, due to environmental conditions or lack of early childhood experiences which encourage healthy development.

They may enter kindergarten at a level behind their peers, and experience subsequent difficulties in school, leading to early drop-out. As adults, they are more likely to be unemployed or on social assistance. And the cycle of poverty continues.

However, a long history of delivery of Head Start programs, and substantial research (such as the Perry Preschool Project, the most extensive longitudinal study ever conducted on the effects of early intervention with disadvantaged children) has shown that if these disadvantaged children have the opportunity to attend a quality preschool program, they can develop the skills that they'll need when they enter school. They receive a "head start" both educationally and socially, and get off to a good start toward success in school and in later life. The active involvement of parents in the program enhances the positive benefits for both child and family.

Head Start programs provide services to both children and their families. The primary goals of the program are as follows:

- to provide children with a comprehensive program that will enhance their development and prepare them for a successful entry into kindergarten; and
- to promote the physical, social and emotional well-being of families.

Head Start programs may have slightly different service delivery models, but all provide the same key elements: the children's program and the family services program.

The children attend the early childhood program on either a half-day or full-day basis; each classroom is staffed by a teacher, teacher aide and a speech-language pathologist (whose services are particularly important because so many of the children have some level of language delay). Because disadvantaged children are also at greater risk for health problems, the program also includes a primary health care component (physical examinations, dental screening, and vision and hearing screenings), mental health services and a substantial nutrition program. The family program delivers a number of services, including weekly support groups, parenting programs, home visits to families, classroom participation, mental health services, family literacy activities, food co-ops, clothing exchanges.

Partnerships between Head Start programs in Edmonton and other agencies such as the Capital Health Authority, Prospects Literacy and the Edmonton Public Library have enabled a broad range of services to be made available and easily accessible to Head Start children and families.

How does Head Start promote positive long-term outcomes for children and families? As a comprehensive two-generational program, it can address multiple risk factors for both children and families. It also has the capacity to strengthen a number of protective factors: healthy development, self-esteem, social competence, trust, independence and positive coping skills.

Further, strengthening the family unit, which is a key objective of Head Start, helps create a stable nurturing environment for the child, a key protective factor in the lives of resilient children.

Is Head Start really effective? Research conducted in the United States (i.e. Head Start Synthesis Project) has shown that children who attended Head Start programs, were better prepared for school entry, were less likely to be assigned to special education and less likely to be held back a grade in school. Head Start children also had better health, immunization rates, and nutrition, as well

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as enhanced socio-emotional characteristics. Family life was also found to be strengthened through the involvement of parents in the program.

The Perry Preschool Project, the most extensive longitudinal study ever conducted on the effects of early intervention with disadvantaged children, has shown that for every $1 spent on these programs, $7.16 is saved later on in special education, welfare, health care, criminal justice and social costs.

What is the future of Head Start in Edmonton? There has been significant expansion of the program over the past three years because of increased support from all levels of government. Currently over 400 children and their families are being served—however the number of children who could benefit from the program is estimated at between 2,500 to 3,000.

The long-term vision for Head Start in our city is to see that all preschool children in Edmonton who are at-risk due to the detrimental effects of poverty and disadvantage will have the opportunity to participate, with their families, in a Head Start program in their community.

Uri Bronfenbrenner, a well-known author and researcher in the field of early intervention, has written:

"At a time when many children are being placed at greater risk as a result of parental unemployment, other income losses, and reduction of health and family services, it is essential to determine which policies and programs can do most to enable families to perform the magic feat of which they alone are capable...making and keeping human beings human."

For more information about Head Start in Edmonton, call:
ABC Head Start Program — 461-5353
Atonement Home — 422-7263
Mother Earth and Me (Aboriginal Head Start) — 448-7372
Norwood Community Services Centre — 471-3737
Oliver School Centre for Children — 482-2116

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municipal governments to take action on family poverty. "Each Canadian has a vested interest in overcoming this social obstacle, but governments have a legal and moral imperative to take the lead in removing whatever barriers prevent students from enjoying the full benefit of the public education to which they are entitled," the handbook states.

In 1994, the Alberta government halved funding for early childhood services, chopped grants for high needs schools by 18 per cent and axed grants for community schools. Although funding for early childhood services was partially restored in 1995 and fully restored in 1996, much remains to be done. School food programs, compensatory education programs and school health services are just some of the initiatives that would help ensure brighter futures for students in poverty.

Alberta Education's mandate is "to ensure that all students have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to be self-reliant, responsible, caring and contributing members of society." Fulfilling that mandate must involve tackling child and family poverty.

STUDENTS IN POVERTY: Toward Awareness, Action, and Wider Knowledge By Canadian School Boards Association, 1997, 47 pages, $20.

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