

A realistic poverty strategy

Hundreds of thousands out of work in auto, manufacturing and forestry

Posted -35 sec ago

Dalton McGuinty's government moved boldly Thursday to ban flavoured cigarillos.

Whew. There's a relief. Those of you who thought jobs, the economy and perhaps national unity were the big issues can rest easy.

If you lost your job last week, don't worry.

When you're standing in the breadline, you won't be bothered by all those hundreds of people puffing on fancy little cigars in your face.

Is this the Canadian equivalent of the fall of Rome?

Is every crazed politician in this country fiddling while the rest of us burn?

Children's Minister Deb Matthews held a news conference Thursday to unveil the government's "poverty strategy."

It calls for \$1.5-billion investment from the feds -- more than the province is pitching in.

They pledge to reduce the number of children living in poverty by 25 per cent in five years.

The exit strategy is obvious.

It won't happen -- so blame the feds.

Here's my poverty strategy: No. 1. Get the economy moving. There's not a damn thing governments can do about poor people.

They just encourage it by paying welfare and child benefits to people who shouldn't have kids in the first place.

A real poverty strategy would include a way to stop people who can't afford it from having babies.

I suggest a cap-and-trade system might work.

You'd need a special credit to have a child.

Every woman gets one.

Poor women could sell those credits to rich families so only those who can afford kids would have them.

And don't tell me that's a heartless right-wing solution. That socialist paradise in China already has a version in place.

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of hard-working people who would sooner eat dirt than take welfare have been thrown out of work with the catastrophe that has happened in our auto, manufacturing and forestry sectors.

What does our government do?

They tinker with insignificant and meaningless legislation.

The NDP, in this time of crisis, thinks a breastfeeding strategy is top of mind.

Nickel Belt MPP Frances Gelinis held a news conference this week to call on the government to have health-care providers support new moms who breastfeed.

It caught the attention of news cameras when moms showed up to nurse their babes in the visitors' gallery here.

Newsflash: Women have been breastfeeding their kids without government aid for millennia.

I nursed two babies -- one of whom was born extremely prematurely.

My strategy?

This is your breast. That is your hungry baby. When one meets the other, they figure it out.

If either one can't figure it out, well, Darwin got it right. It's survival of the fittest.

(On the other hand, breastfeeding should be part of a poverty strategy. I never figured out why people bought formula when the real stuff is delivered free at the right temperature and in attractive containers.)

Meanwhile, what has the government come up with by way of restraint?

Aside from cancelling some family health teams, they have limited their salary increases and those of senior public servants to 1.5 per cent.

They are "encouraging" employers in the broader public sector to do likewise.

Hello?

Earth to government.

"Limiting" a pay increase on, say, a \$500,000 salary of an upper level bureaucrat, is a joke.

If the government really wanted to show leadership, they would freeze salaries and roll back the obscene salaries these fatcats enjoy -- at our expense.

The head of the WSIB, Jill Hutcheon, spent thousands of taxpayers' dollars on hotels, taxis -- groceries even.

In April, she billed \$2,235 at the posh Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York City for a "Women's Leadership Conference."

You could feed a family of four for a month on the \$311 she paid to park her car. So much for poverty.

Did I mention Hutcheon's salary? Just shy of half a million bucks in 2007.

Oddly, the only person around here who seems to get all the hypocrisy is PC Leader John Tory.

"I believe the best way you are going to lift people out of poverty, the best way in which you are going to ensure people don't fall into poverty, is to strengthen the economy," Tory told reporters Thursday.

Exactly.

A poverty strategy?

There was nothing in it for seniors who are eating cat food because their pensions are now worthless.

What the heck? Let them eat sushi.

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Recreation plan must look at poor children — COLUMN — COMMENT ON THE COLUMN

Updated 0 sec ago

Three months ago, Ward 3 Coun. Bryan Hayes made a passionate speech to city council, complete with a resolution, suggesting that the city needed to do more to ensure that all residents have a fair and equal opportunity to participate in recreational activities.

The resolution followed his attendance at an AMO conference, where he learned that providing access to recreation for low income families is a social policy growing in Ontario.

Recreation also has physical, social and economic benefits, which ultimately reduce the costs of medical care, psychologists, probation officers and Children's Aid Society.

A provincial task force has been struck to develop policy guidelines to provide better access to recreation for low-income families.

Hayes wants the city to follow suit since the city doesn't have such a policy.

Ontario Works has a program that offers some assistance to needy families.

The Canadian Tire Jump Start Program and the Sault Ste. Marie Sports Council also have programs to help financially strapped families.

Corporation-sponsored free swims and skates are organized over the Christmas holidays and during Bon Soo.

Commissioner of community services Nick Apostle said Hayes' resolution has merits and is being investigated by staff.

Rinks and pools in the city, recreation that comes with a small price tag, have maintained consistent user numbers, with slight increases in senior usage.

The city could help with discounted rates or more free public sessions at its own facilities.

Organized sports, such as hockey, soccer, football and ringette, are often more costly and run by other associations.

The city has an opportunity to lead and show youth that they matter.

It can join forces with school boards, Children's Aid Society, Algoma Family Services and sporting organizations to find a workable solution, whether it be to reduce registration fees for an exchange of volunteer hours, hold equipment swaps to defer family costs or establish a funding or bursary system.

Perhaps, one day the system can become self-sustaining with the aid of private and corporate donations or replenished with portions of registration fees.

While fewer than 30 per cent of Ontario municipalities have such a strategy, it's an opportunity for the city to become a leader, help youth and create a healthier community.

The city is working on plans to build an indoor soccer facility, or multi-purpose facility that could also house other sports.

A report to council is expected in the new year.

The long-awaited skatepark will open in the spring.

In recent years, enhancements and expansion have occurred at Strathclair Park, Bellevue Park, the John Rhodes Centre and the Essar Centre.

The city's parks and recreation master plan dates back to 1986 and staff recognize the need to update it.

Now is the time for council to encourage staff to update the master plan that would include such a strategy.

Kudos to Hayes for the idea.

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Long years of poor bashing finally brought to an end

Deb Matthews sought out information from those with direct experience of poverty

December 08, 2008

PAT CAPPONI

What may get lost in the back and forth over whether the provincial Liberals have gone too far or not far enough in their poverty reduction strategy is that it marks the end of a particularly shameful period in Ontario, one in which those living in poverty had to endure not only deep cuts to already barely adequate incomes but also found themselves branded as social pariahs, lazy and resistant to work, revelling in their abuse of the system.

Beginning in 1995, the government of the day succeeded in appealing to the worst instincts of Ontarians, ensuring that the shunning and punishing of the poor, the vulnerable, the lost would be seen as acceptable measures to the general public.

That approach resonated, welfare fraud stories appeared in national papers and were used to justify continuing harshness toward those who were barely able to keep body and soul together.

I had numerous conversations back then with those who bore the brunt of these attacks, some in small towns around the province, some here in Toronto. I remember the pain in people's voices, the degradation they felt: the single mother who told me that she experienced accusatory glares from other passengers when she rode the streetcar with her children. She was sure they knew she was a welfare mom and she was sure they hated her for that. Or the woman living in a community up north who never went out during the day because her neighbours would see her and know she wasn't working, and she was afraid their attitudes toward her would change. I remember the first cheques after the cuts came into effect, how shocked the recipients were at how much was taken from them, how for some it meant giving up their homes, for others giving up meals.

Those mean-spirited and wrong-headed policies and tactics kept those living in poverty quiet for more than a decade, too concerned with basic survival, made too ashamed to protest, their advocates largely silent for fear that they too would experience retaliatory funding cuts for speaking out.

The rebranded Ontario Works became less about supporting individuals in hard times and more about rigid and intrusive policing, as did the Ontario Disability Support Program. Rules were put on a significantly higher plane than individuals in need, and workers were left with no discretion when it came to cutting people off. The results of these get-tough initiatives are all around us: on our streets, in our parks, in crowded church basements and in beleaguered food banks. Our social fabric seemed to be unravelling as more and more the homeless and the destitute washed up in neighbourhoods and were reviled for their very presence.

The individuality, the basic humanity of the men and women who lost their footing during this period remained unseen, their skills and talents and abilities untapped as their physical and mental health declined. Ontario didn't seem to care that people with major illnesses such as AIDS, diabetes and MS



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO
Deb Matthews, lead minister on the province's poverty strategy, and George Smitherman presented their report called "Breaking the Cycle" at a press conference in Toronto Dec. 4, 2008.

were sleeping on the street.

So what does it mean that the Ontario government is talking about poverty reduction and about the retooling of Ontario Works and ODSP? Does it put food into the mouths of the hungry today? Or house the homeless? No. But it does do something of equal magnitude: it ends more than a decade of poor bashing, of deliberate and callous targeting of those living in poverty.

And that's not all. Children and Youth Minister Deb Matthews said at the beginning of her consultations that she was less interested in hearing from agencies than she was in hearing from those with direct experience of poverty. Imagine that: an Ontario cabinet minister wanting to hear from the poor instead of simply looking for a way to score cheap points by excoriating them.

What she heard over and over was how Ontario Works and ODSP were keeping people in poverty, how they were punishing initiative, how the arbitrary and sometimes bizarre application of rules ensured that no one made it out alive. She listened respectfully, and learned. And the more she listened, the more those living in poverty spoke out, realizing perhaps that a new era was at hand, one that promised change, one that treated people with respect and empathy.

Inviting those who've endured the policies of the Harris years to be part of the retooling of Ontario Works and ODSP is huge. Understanding and acting on the knowledge of how much those living in poverty want to improve their lives for themselves and for their children, want educational and vocational training, want opportunity, want a way out of the desperate and degrading lives they've been living is also huge.

The premier could have shelved any talk of poverty reduction in the face of a rapidly deteriorating economy across the globe. He did not. He understands that poverty costs, not just the individual, but the community and the province, in abilities not tapped, in ideas not implemented, in children deprived of a decent nutritional start in life. That soaring health budgets are directly impacted by chronic illnesses that thrive in poor communities, though interventions come too late to make a real difference for too many. Poverty kills.

We can't afford to rest on our laurels, however. We must ensure that Ontario Works and ODSP are brought to levels of adequacy so that people can live in dignity, and we must ensure that those living in poverty are part of any stimulus package that is announced. The poor would love to be part of working in their communities, to be upgrading and repairing social housing and to be part of building new homes all across this province.

It's a new day in Ontario. A day that brings the first glimmer of hope into lives that have been too long deprived of it.

Pat Capponi is a facilitator for Voices From the Street, a program that teaches advocacy and leadership to those with histories of homelessness and poverty.



Child poverty exists throughout region

Patrick Lake

Published on Dec 08, 2008

Earlier this month, along with other Children's Aid Societies in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), York CAS published a report on child poverty.

The report was prepared and released in partnership with the Social Planning Network.

Greater Trouble in the Greater Toronto Area reports half of all children in Ontario who live in poverty - about 141,000 - live in the GTA, up from 44 per cent in 1997.

In the same period, the percentage of impoverished GTA children living in York Region increased from 10 per cent to 12 per cent.

The report presents many frightening statistics that highlight everything from the unacceptable racial disparity in child poverty rates to that fact while the number of children in York Region increased by 34 per cent between 1997 and 2005, the number of children who live in poverty increased by 44 per cent.

What is most frightening is this spread of child poverty took place during a time of unprecedented economic growth and strength.

Now that we are facing much tougher economic times, how much worse will it be for those families already in poverty and for those bordering on poverty?

In York Region, child poverty does not exist in isolated pockets.

As you might expect, there's poverty in Georgina and Newmarket, but there's also poverty in Markham and Vaughan.

And, like everywhere else in the GTA, York Region reflects the fact a disproportionate number of children in our diverse communities - whether Canadian-born or newcomers - live in poverty.

One in 10 children of European background live in poverty; one in five for East Asian groups; one in four in Aboriginal, South Asian, Caribbean, South and Central American groups; one in three for Arab and West Asian groups; and one in two for children of African groups.

What's more, throughout this great region, the poor are even more disadvantaged than they are in our neighbouring communities of Toronto and the inner suburbs.

It's difficult to get around because of the lack of public transportation. It's difficult to find affordable housing - Vaughan has the highest median rent in the GTA and Richmond Hill and other communities are more expensive than Toronto. And there's a profound lack of public housing.

There is also much more limited access to educational resources, support services and food banks.

Many of those who work tirelessly for the betterment of our community will tell you they believe it is shameful to live in an environment where there is incredible wealth on one hand and expanding pockets of poor and disadvantaged children on the other.

With these people and organizations - our partners in the community - we at York CAS recognize we must work together co-operatively to tackle these issues.

But what can we do as individuals?

Volunteer at a social services organization from a food bank to York CAS to a family violence organization. Write to politicians urging them to tackle these issues, particularly affordable housing. Reach out to families in your neighbourhood you know to be in trouble.

It's a simple fact even knowing someone cares can make a difference to a family living marginalized lives in our midst because paying the rent means there's no money left for food, clothing, transportation and the other things children need.

Patrick Lake is the executive director of York Region CAS. To reach York Region CAS, call 905-895-2318 .