

B.C.: How has the NDP government treated people who are poor?

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Since the NDP was elected in B.C. in the fall of 1991, there has been good news and bad news for people who are poor. On the positive side, the government has done the following things:

- It funded universal, non stigmatizing lunch programs for schools in low income areas;
- It ended forced employment for single parents on welfare (before this change single parents were forced to look for work or training regardless of the number and ages of their children. Now the operative word is "choice". Single parents on welfare are not forced to look for work or train;
- The earnings exemption for people on welfare was increased to \$100 a month for single people and \$200 for families. After that, people on welfare can keep 25% of what they earn;
- The three year time limit for people on welfare to attend university or college and be able to stay on welfare has been ended for single parents and handicapped people;
- The Ministry of Social Services allocated \$1 million dollars for welfare advocacy groups to apply for. Many have received grants to help them function;
- The Ministry of Social Services funded End Legislated Poverty, the B.C. coalition that has been constantly pushing the government to raise welfare rates to the poverty line and minimum wages to at least \$9.05 an hour.
- The asset exemption for people on welfare has increased from as low as \$5 for transients to \$2,500 and to over \$5,000 for people with children. This means that people don't have to exhaust virtually every penny before applying for welfare;
- Unlike Ministers in previous governments, the Minister of Social Services, Joan Smallwood, is not badmouthing poor people;
- The Ministry is making an effort to improve the treatment of people on welfare when they go to welfare offices. Training programs that bring

people on welfare together with front line workers and supervisors have started.

- It is possible to talk to government about small changes that are needed and be listened to. For example, the government made a rule that all staff and volunteers of non profit groups who accepted Ministry volunteers for the Community Volunteer Program had to have criminal records checks. This proved to be a disaster because many felt that it was an invasion of privacy and also because many groups had volunteers working with them who were sentenced to do community work. The community groups hollered, the Ministry heard, and the policy was changed.

These changes have been made at a time when the unemployment rate in B.C. is 10 to 11 percent, when federal cuts to UI have put even more people on welfare, and when the welfare case load is higher than it has ever been. In December, 1992, over 300,000 people in B.C. were dependent on welfare, over 100,000 of them children. B.C. is also operating within the "cap on CAP". The federal government has limited increases in payments to provinces for welfare by 5 percent, in spite of the huge caseload increase, and in spite of the fact that people on welfare have incomes that are about 50 percent of the poverty line.

Partly because of these pressures, there's also bad news in the B.C. NDP's treatment of the poor. The bad news is:

- Welfare rate increases have been barely noticeable, and in some cases don't even meet the cost of living. This is the major item that would improve the lives of the 300,000 people on welfare;
- The minimum wage is going up too slowly to make a dent in poverty. Labour Minister Moe Sihota told End Legislated Poverty that he would like to get the minimum wage up to 125 percent of the poverty line (over \$9.00 an hour) within the government's term. So far he raised it from \$5 to \$5.50 and has announced an increase to \$6.00 to take effect on April 1st. At this rate, the minimum wage will only reach \$7.00 or \$7.50 within the government's term. Increasing minimum wage is a way to reduce poverty without costing taxpayers a cent;
- The government has done nothing to deal with a housing crisis for low income people, not only in the cities, but throughout the province. Rent control is another way for governments to reduce poverty without costing taxpayers a cent. While some legislation regarding tenants is expected in the next session, rent control is not expected.
- The focus of the Ministry of Social Services seems to be trying to do what they can to make things humane "within existng resources,"

rather than working to develop public support for policies, like taxing the rich and corporations, that would increase the resources they have to work with.

- The government doesn't seem to understand that the free trade deals will make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to implement an economic strategy that will create jobs and maintain and improve the public services that we need. Or, if they do understand this, it isn't coming across loud and clear. Smallwood is an exception. She chaired a forum on the North American Free Trade Agreement in March and did explain that the deal would make poverty worse and reduce the means government had of coping with it. The government is publicly opposed to NAFTA, but hasn't voiced similar opposition to the Canada-U.S. deal. While they have set up an all-party committee to hear briefs on NAFTA, it is extremely low profile. Groups active in the BC branch of Action Canada Network have been pushing the government to examine ways in which free trade will limit their powers to create employment and deal with increasing welfare caseloads, among other things. It's possible that they are slowly becoming more aware of the need to challenge free trade. We'll see in the coming months.

It is gratifying to have a government that even makes small positive changes. But some of us keep hoping that this government would be more than that — a government that sees the need to challenge the corporate agenda of low welfare, low wages, free trade, deficit hysteria, public service cuts, competitiveness, and low taxes on the rich; a government that would make powerful allies with the other NDP provinces to challenge this agenda, not use its language.

With jobless growth the buzzword of the future, with the Canada Assistance Plan rumoured to be on the chopping block, with Bill C-69 about to end provincial funds for health and post-secondary education, with UI cuts forcing more people onto welfare, and with free trade giving transnational corporations most of the control over investment, job creation, and services, there won't be much left that elected governments, accountable to us, can do to reduce and end poverty.

Thousands of Canadians are trying to build a social movement that will end these corporate agenda policies and replace them with co-operative policies that redistribute wealth and power more equally. It would be nice to have some governments help out.