

## Waste of a Nation: Poor People Speak Out About Charity<sup>1</sup>

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We fear that charities are becoming the new "solution" to poverty. There is plenty of evidence that this fear is not mere paranoia. Food Banks are becoming a permanent fixture. In the autumn of 1990, about 590,000 individuals received monthly aid from food banks in Canada, an increase of 53 percent from the spring of 1989.

The increase in people who need charity has been caused by Tory government actions. Since 1984, the government has capped the Canada Assistance Plan, slashed UI, signed the free trade deal, passed Bill C-69 (ending the universality of medicare), shifted \$4 billion in taxes from corporations to individuals through the GST, and increased taxes for the poor and middle, and reduced them for the rich.

These federal government measures, or policies similar to them, were called for by corporate lobby groups such as the Business Council on National Issues and the Fraser Institute.

At the same time, the federal government is funding groups like "Imagine" to encourage Canadians to give to charities. Here is just one example of how inadequate charity is as a response to the poverty created by government policies. In April 1991, a "successful" U.S.-organized charity event, called The Taste of Nations raised \$70,000 to take leftovers from the tables of the rich and deliver them to the poor. How many fund raisers like this would it take just to replace the amount taken from poor people with incomes under \$15,000 a year by government UI cuts? If they were all on the same huge scale as The Taste of Nations event in Vancouver, it would be about 8,349, or 24 fund raisers every day for a year. Charity cannot hope to fill the need created by government's poverty *creation* policies.

Yet charity is a "solution" to poverty put forward by corporate lobby groups. The Fraser Institute says this about charity:<sup>2</sup>

There is no problem, of course, with private charity to the unemployed, or to the poor at whatever level. For private charity, by its very nature, is far more flexible than the public version. First of all, since it is voluntary, it can be cut off if contributors feel it is doing more harm than good.  
(p. 17)

In short, charity, to the corporate lobby group, is a means of control of and dominance over low income people.

### **Charity: Being on the Receiving End**

How do people feel about using charities? Although a lot has been written about charity and charities, very little of it speaks directly about the feelings, experiences and opinions of people who rely on charity. Something more extensive on charity, from the point of charity users, needed to be done. End Legislated Poverty (ELP) decided to investigate this question.

Because of the experience of our own members, ELP has known that charity evokes complex thoughts and feelings among people who use it. We know that charity is not all positive for the receivers. Often academics, charities, social agencies, and governments are considered the experts on poverty and poor people. We want poor people to be considered the experts on these subjects.

We know that charity does not meet people's real needs; not even welfare plus charity meets people's needs. Poor people in Canada still experience more sickness, shorter lives, more unemployment, illiteracy, and more trouble with the justice system. Yet we see changes in government programs that make us fear that Canada is going the way of the U.S. where charity is seen as an alternative to social programs.

We see that people who aren't poor, and donate to charity, don't understand that it isn't enough. They feel good about donating to charity. They often expect the poor to be grateful and are angry or confused when the poor aren't grateful. We'd like this study to help people who aren't poor to know that poor people want justice and dignity, not charity. We'd like help from non-poor people in working for full employment, decent wages, and higher welfare rates so that people don't have to suffer the humiliation of using charity. And we want more low income people to get involved in speaking out about their situations and working for the changes we need to end poverty.

### **What We Did**

In April 1991, ELP asked people who use food banks about their feelings on The Taste of Nations fund raising event.

To recruit participants, we distributed the ELP newsletter with articles inviting people to participate, to people in food bank lineups. We put an ad in *Transitions*, the newsletter of the B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities. We talked to people at six food bank depots, two soup lines, one seniors centre, and one women's centre.

As a result of these contacts, we set up two groups, one of seven women who used the Collingwood food bank and another of five people who called

the ELP office and said they wanted to participate. To make meetings accessible, the project provided bus fare, child care, or a ten dollar honorarium to group participants. We considered this comparable to the way a company pays consultants for their expertise.

We also recorded comments made by people in the food bank line ups and at the missions. We also took blank placards to the food lineups and asked people to jot down their own comments about charities. During the project, we talked to over 100 people.

The independent group became enthusiastic over ways of reaching out to food bank users. They also wanted to find which policies, if any, charities use to guide treatment of charity users. They decided to solicit picket sign slogans as an effective way of getting charity-user input into the public event we held at the end of the project. It also gave people a concrete vehicle for their frustrations. Group members knew that people had a lot to say, and were angry, upset and frustrated. Toward the end of the project, group participants were invited to see the draft report and to make comments and additions to it. Many of their comments are included here.

### **What is Charity?**

During one of our initial meetings we asked participants: "What is charity?" At first, people came up with words like "sharing," "helping out those in need," "handouts," gifts," and "kindness." Then one person mentioned that all those definitions related to the giver of the charity and not the receiver. This person went on to say:

To a lot of people who give to charity, or who have never needed it, charity is a good thing. It's sharing . . . but when you don't have anything to eat for yourself, let alone donate, then you see things differently . . . it's humiliating and degrading . . .

This comment moved others to add their comments about charity: "cold," impersonal," "dependency," "tax free," and "poorly distributed." That's how people who used charities described them throughout the project.

### **Experiences with Charities**

Participants pointed out that, in the absence of jobs, decent pay, and adequate welfare, they need charity:

What else do you have if you don't have charities? Say if there were no charities, what alternatives do you have? If you don't have them, you can't use them and you use them because you need them.

I think you'll always have problems. People get five dollars an hour today. A lot of people can't work full time. What do you do to help them?

Going to Carnegie is something to do and you can afford to go there because it's mostly free. If you had a full-time job though, maybe you wouldn't use it except for the library. If you had enough money, I suppose you could take the course you want instead of the course they give you.

I like charity because without [it], what would we do?

I'm thankful that we do have places to go when we are in need. I don't really like to do that you know, but when you get times when you have to turn to something, go to something you know . . .

As one woman said: "I would rather be in a position where I could give to the food bank. I'm sure all of us would."

People at soup kitchens and missions talked about the high 'price' of the charity they received:

I guess it's a trade off, right? We listen to [the preacher] and we get to eat.

It's better than going hungry. At night, for dinner, it really gets packed, and . . . they give a sermon before we get to eat . . . but, when you need to eat, you have to put up with that bull.

Here the preacher prays for our souls and blesses the lord for the food we get to eat . . . it's all for show.

I think it's ridiculous to have to listen to all the crap he says, but sometimes there's no choice. When it's go hungry or come here, what choice do you have?

In some ways God created charity in all of us to help each other out there in times of need. Well if God was better organized, there wouldn't be a need for charity.

One woman talked about her slide from charity donor to user:

Well this is my first time here. I'd been in a car accident so I can't work and when I was working we used to donate to food banks . . . and now that I need it, I don't want to feel that I'm lowering myself to come here. It's just something that people need. What would I do if I couldn't use the food bank? If my kids were hungry enough, I'd go out and steal it. . . . It does bother me that I have to come here.

Other women spoke about the pressures they face as women trying to support their children on the inadequate pay in women's job ghettos:

What everyone I think it trying to do here is to better their families. And the fact that we don't have any choices is [because] number one, we're women. I mean we're very well aware of that. We make substantially

less in the work force than men do. The fact that we're single women, that's another strike against us, and that we have children.

I know it's hard, even if you have some work. But if [charity is] there, I don't mind using it. You have to. You don't get paid enough to survive on your own. You have to get help somewhere.

It doesn't matter even if you are working because I'm working and I can't make it.

No one else out there is going to do it for us. If the food bank closes tomorrow, as someone said, I'd beg, borrow, steal, sell my body to feed my children.

If find it frustrating that I can't make do for my family on my own; that I even have to ask for help.

## **How People Get Treated**

Food bank users had a lot to say about the insulting and humiliating ways they get treated there:

. . . the people here don't really treat you very nice . . . A few of them are OK . . . some of them tell you, you can't do this, you can't do that and yell at you.

You know there's a lot of hostility here. They demean you, they yell at you, they treat you like children, and they have this attitude, you know, that they're better than you because they're volunteering . . .

If there was some other resource, we'd just say forget it. We wouldn't continue to come here and be put down. I think that people end up feeling very, very demeaned, and there's women that don't come any more and I wonder . . . how they survive.

It makes me sad that a woman was so offended here that she won't be back. And yet you know she's going to sit at home and be depressed, and her kid's going to be hungry. That's pathetic.

I can't eat a lot of this food because of my allergies, but you know, I'm supposed to be grateful and they get indignant if I dare complain, so I just eat it and shut up.

. . . to be thrown the employment paper and told: "Get a job!"

So many people here have lost their dignity because of charity.

We are being discriminated against because we are poor.

I guess my family was always poor. I never recognized it as a child, but we never had much money. My early experiences with charity were full of mixed feelings. I was always told not to accept charity, that it was 'begging.' I remember getting a pair of new shoes as a gift. My family couldn't afford them. And I was so thankful that I couldn't tell anyone that the shoes just didn't fit right. They were too small. So the gift, the charity, wasn't what it should have been. But I had to make do . . . and I wore those shoes.

We were always poor and as a child I could never understand why my mother didn't have the money to buy food and other things.

I thought that giving was supposed to be a pleasure . . . Why are the people receiving made to feel so humble? Why are we made to feel humiliated because we're receiving? . . . We're not supposed to be arrogant, but why does the giver get to be arrogant?

### **Food Quality and Quantity**

Commenting on the food they got at food banks, soup kitchens, and missions, people explained how inappropriate, unhealthy and insulting these charities can be.

We don't want Christmas candies for three weeks after Christmas and no spaghetti, no rice, no meat, no staples.

There should be a variety of foods because this is a multicultural centre.

Some of the things I get here have expired dates or they're not really good for you. I just want to be treated like another human being and have ordinary food that tastes good and that's good for the kids too.

There's no consistency from week to week. You might get soap and tampons and nothing you can eat. You need the staples and the consistency of knowing what's going to be available so you can plan better.

I have to eat certain foods cause I have allergies, but they don't have those foods here. Sometimes I think some of the food I get here is poison or rotten and I end up throwing it out.

The food here is nothing special . . . well, damn awful actually.

### **Waiting for Handouts**

People who use charity know a lot about waiting. There is a line-up at virtually every food bank and soup kitchen in town. These comments reflect how distressing this experience can be:

It's degrading to make people stand in line-ups to beg for food.

I have four children. you have to wait in line in a basement for an hour with four children for a bag of food. It's frustrating. The one I was going to is dark and dirty.

There should be a system so children are entertained so they don't bug people. We shouldn't have to wait outside anyway.

It's humiliating for a person to have to stand in a line.

There are children. It's cold.

When I first came to the food bank I didn't know what to expect. I was scared and felt too embarrassed to tell my friends . . . I see a lot of anger in the faces. I don't talk to anyone because I'm not sure what they'll think about someone like me being here. I guess I'm not used to the fact that I'm really just the same as them now.

. . . The line-ups are too long. Sometimes it's raining and for the next week I'm sick as hell. Sometimes, even though I come with a friend, I feel so lonely when I'm standing in line.

## **Charity and Greed**

People who use charities participated in the ELP workshop on the causes of poverty. We used Statistics Canada data<sup>3</sup> to show how wealth is distributed in Canada; that the richest 10 percent of Canadians have 51.3 percent of the wealth — more than all the rest of Canadians combined. The poorest 10 percent of Canadians have minus .3 percent of the wealth in Canada. They are in debt.

Here's what the participants had to say about wealth, greed and charity:

I want people to be as conscious of what greed is as they are of what charity is. Just as we sit here and expose how we feel about charity, so greed should be exposed.

Some people have had a lot and their crumbs have been thrown to the rest of us.

That's where the need for charity comes from: Greed.

Corporate greed helps individuals keep their own greed going. It makes people think that greed and accumulation is the right way to live. It's the problem, not the right way.

If each of us was that rich, would we give to the poor people or would we say: "I worked hard"? Actually I have pity for those people. Money makes them feel like they're important, but it really doesn't make them 'someone'.

People that have the wealth are throwing the crumbs. They get the tax write-offs and justify their power and control. They don't want to look greedy so they donate to charity. But they still hold the majority of the country's wealth.

Making people aware that charity is the end result of greed is very important.

What is the long-term ramification of all this charity? How does it undermine the social structure of Canada? I think it has a more long term effect than the greedy people think it does. The more they take away the more it costs them. It makes a great division between the rich and poor when what we need is a balance.

They [the rich] don't want to look greedy, so they give to charity. First they give to the charities like the symphony and ballet and last is the poor. We get the crumbs.

Many participants emphasized that compared to their own donations, corporations are not giving their fair share:

We're not asking for a million dollars a year. Hey, it's ok to be rich. But if you want to be rich you have to pay your fair share because we're damn well paying ours.

I like to give things that I don't want any more. It makes me feel good. It's equally important to give as to receive. We're on the receiving end but [for] people with money, private companies, not just the government, it's important to give. There are people who are wealthy and there's lots of extra things they could give.

. . . corporations [are] all very willing at Christmas, Easter or special holidays to dip into their pockets . . . and donate. But what about the rest of the year when our kids are going without new shoes, clothes, or they don't have a bike like some other kids? . . . I often donate clothes to friends, . . . but these conglomerates like Sears or Safeway could be more actively involved. We get the stuff the consumer won't buy, the day-old bread.

The government isn't distributing the money properly. Banks and corporations get huge tax breaks and people are begging for a bag of food.

## **What We Want**

People who need charity had a lot to say about what would make their situations better when they have to use charity, and what can be done to reduce the need for charity. They suggested solutions such as putting more money into job training, raising the minimum wage and welfare rates, rent subsidies or controls, creating jobs, and eliminating the GST and the free trade deal.

You don't help keep people down. you bring them up by giving them proper housing, proper food, proper clothing. People will respond much, much better . . . There won't be so much crime.

We should raise the welfare rates . . .

Well obviously the welfare rates are too low. Most people here, if not all, are on welfare. If people had less rent to pay or a bigger cheque, they might not have to line up for a bag of groceries.

Children should not have to suffer because their parents are on welfare. Charities can be a good thing but kids should not have to use the old discards, like worn-out dirty beds, leftovers and this kind of thing. Welfare could budget for the sake of children's health; it's not their fault.

If you're only making \$5.00 an hour, you're worse off than [when you're on] welfare or taking charity. You have to pay for everything. If you don't get \$8.00 or more you might as well be on charity.

More jobs, less charity.

How about a hand-up, not a hand-out?

Charity users and those who give it out need to know more about each other. Maybe we could come up with guidelines on how we want to be treated and we could compare these with what the food bank uses.

Welfare rates and minimum wages have to be increased. The welfare system has to be separated from the structure of charity. The danger that charity will replace the welfare system is very real.

## **How We'll Get It**

Participants had a lot of ideas for ways to mobilize to achieve these goals:

We need billboards like the racism billboards [saying]: "Don't put down people who are poor."

They have marches for everything else. Why not a hunger march?

We need a more political stance from the people who organize and run charities.

Charities have to be political.

People must use the fact that they're together to help each other speak up about the issue.

Get each other to support each another in fighting the injustices out there.

## **Conclusions**

As the participants so eloquently explained, charity is no solution to poverty. In fact, it helps to keep poverty in place. We are concerned that all levels of government are moving to replace safety nets with charity. As one participant said: "They already have to a certain extent. You go to a welfare office and ask for assistance at the end of the month and they ask you if you've been referred to a food bank."

We believe that Canadians must reaffirm our commitment to full employment and decent social programs. People who live in a just society should not be forced to rely on charity. We want to end the need for charity. We ask people who read this report to take up our challenge, put forward by Debbie Ellison when she spoke outside The Taste of Nations event in April, 1991:

We challenge people who aren't poor to ask hard questions about charity. Does charity meet the needs of poor people? How many people fall through the cracks of charity? How many don't use food banks because they are disabled or because they work, or because they are students and can't get there? How many don't use food banks because they would rather be hungry than humiliated? Will charity end poverty? Or will it let people think that the hunger problem is solved when it is growing instead? Does charity reflect the kind of society we want? Do we want a society where the poor subsist on leftovers from the rich?

We challenge people who aren't poor to listen to people who are poor. Some of us do use food banks. But it's not because we like to. We don't want to live in a society where one group is powerful and another powerless. We want to have a relationship of equality and citizenship. We don't want handouts and humiliation. We want jobs and adequate incomes.

We challenge people who aren't poor to join with us in rejecting American style social programs where food and housing are provided for the poor at the whim of the rich. And we challenge people who aren't poor to work with us to change our system to end poverty. We need jobs, housing, higher minimum wage, higher welfare. Canada has the resources to provide a decent life for everyone. We challenge people who aren't poor to demand that our politicians work for a just society, where people are more equal and where the poor don't have to depend on leftovers from the rich to subsist.

#### NOTES

1. Excerpted from *Waste of a Nation*, an End Legislated Poverty Report, August 1992.
2. *On Economics and the Canadian Bishops*, Fraser Institute.
3. G. Oja, *Changes in the Distribution of Wealth in Canada*. Statistics Canada, June, 1987 Cat. 13-588.