

A Response to the New Brunswick Government's Social Reform Paper "Creating New Options"

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Direction of discussion paper: Back to the Poor Laws

We view this discussion paper as another step by the McKenna government in dismantling the social welfare system which took New Brunswickers over two hundred years to build. Generally, the evolution of the Canadian welfare state corresponds with the responsibility for social provision shifting from the family and local charitable organizations to municipal authorities, then to provincial levels, and finally to the federal level. This evolution, which has been the pattern of development for most of this century, came to a halt under the Mulroney government in the 1980s and has actually been reversed here in new Brunswick under the McKenna government.

In this Province we are actually witnessing a reversal of the historical progress of dealing with financial distress. Over the past six years the McKenna government has been consistently abdicating its constitutional responsibilities for the provision of social welfare. Through its policies of retrenchment and cut-backs, along with the lowest rates of welfare in the country, this government has pushed its responsibility down onto local communities to look after its poor by using such degrading charitable devices as soup kitchens, food banks, emergency shelters and clothing depots. Who would have thought twenty years ago that we would have more food banks today than MacDonaldis restaurants? This discussion paper represents another step in this devolution of the welfare state as it suggests that responsibility for social welfare will now be pushed down to the family level. Thus, we are returning to the very same conditions that we originally put a welfare state in place to deal with. The family, local charities and churches could not adequately deal with the social needs of a modern industrial society at any time during the first half of this century. Why does the McKenna government think that these measures will work now as we head into the twenty-first century?

The sad irony of this whole situation is that New Brunswick was the last province in Canada to repeal its Elizabethan Poor Laws (in 1960), and now appears to be the first province to bring them back. There are, in fact, many similarities between the dreaded Poor Laws and your Discussion Paper.

First, by emphasizing the difference between unemployable and employable income assistance recipients you are reviving the notion that there are two groups of poor people - the deserving and the non-deserving. Such labelling often engenders harsh and punitive attitudes by an uninformed public in that the employable (non-deserving) group is often blamed for the poverty it is experiencing in spite of the reality of a sick economy that cannot accommodate them. The Poor Laws taught us that this categorization leads to one's "employability status" being the main criterion for assistance rather than "need". We think your discussion paper undermines the Canada Assistance Plan's principle that "need" be the sole criterion for financial assistance. And, we think it will take us down the same road as the American welfare proposal that employable persons be eligible for assistance for a maximum of two years after which they are on their own — no matter what their circumstances may be.

Second, requiring that people in need approach their families and/or that families be obligated to contribute to the assistance of a family member was also a principle of the unworkable Elizabethan Poor Laws. Experience with the Poor Laws showed us that when family ties are positive, members will support each other financially and emotionally as well. And we know this to be the case even today. The Poor Laws also showed us the weaknesses of family responsibility. Not all families are able to contribute to help their members. Poor people tend to come from poor families. Not all families have positive relationships among their members. Not all families have members who live in close proximity to each other. And, contributing to the financial situation of a relative often undermines the financial security of those contributing. Family responsibility as a condition of eligibility did not work in the nineteenth century even with the extended family living in an agrarian society being the typical family unit. Why do you think it will work in the high tech, post-industrial and highly mobile society of the twenty-first century, where almost half our families are single parent units?

Third, emphasizing partnerships with local community organizations — that is, dumping your responsibilities onto churches and volunteer groups, is also a Poor Law practice. Although heroic in their efforts to minister to the needs of the poor, churches and local charities have been trying to tell you for years that they cannot do any more. Can you tell us how it contributes to the dignity of people or how it builds citizenship when you make people line up at soup kitchens and food banks just so they can eat?

Don't you think you are violating the Canada Assistance Plan's principal objective — "To provide *adequate* assistance to those in need," by promoting soup kitchens, food banks, etc.?

Finally, we believe you have elevated the Poor Law practice of making moral judgements on the poor to a fine art form. This document supports the socially pernicious myth that people on welfare are lazy, inactive, personally deficient and prefer welfare over work. This government has shown its disdain over and over again toward New Brunswickers who are forced to resort to income assistance. As evidence:

- It is this government which has the lowest rates of social welfare benefits in Canada.
- It is this government which forced 8,000 recipients to line up in public view in the cold of winter to receive their meagre welfare cheques.
- It is this government which took the day care subsidy away from single parents on income assistance who were attending university.
- And, it was the leader of this government—the biggest moral entrepreneur of them all—who referred to income assistance and other social programs as "... programs which foster dependency, which make it comfortable for people to do nothing and learn nothing" (Frank McKenna, quoted in *The Daily Gleaner*, June 15, 1993).

Such cynical, moralistic and punitive views would probably be considered as inciting hatred toward an identifiable group of people if it were any other group in society but poor people. And, as with most acts of discrimination, they are based entirely on myth and stereotype, and fly in the face of all evidence. People do not choose poverty and income assistance as a career goal. There are many thousands of New Brunswickers working at poverty wages who do not leave their jobs. There are thousands of unemployed New Brunswickers who beat the pavement every day in search of a job. People are unemployed by circumstances not by choice, and this Discussion Paper does *nothing* about the absence of jobs.

The fallacy of self-sufficiency

The goal promoted by this Discussion Paper of "self-sufficiency" also underpins the government's other social reform activities. In fact, self-sufficiency is almost like a religion to this government and its leader, Frank McKenna, who has been called the "Billy Graham of self-sufficiency."

Self-sufficiency or self-reliance is a concept which has been used by opponents of the welfare state such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. It is based on an ideal that the state should do less and that people should do more to assist themselves. We believe that this concept is unworkable and morally objectionable.

The arguments in favour of self-sufficiency or self-reliance refer to two central concepts — the notions of “reliance” and “the self.” Looking at the concept of “reliance” first it should be noted that there are many people in dependency situations besides the poor — children, students, mothers caring for children, the aged who have earned retirement, etc. However, society does not find these dependencies offensive. Instead it fixates on those who are employable but are not working and whose character, therefore, would seem to be flawed. That is, the poor are viewed as if it were their choice to be poor and to rely on the state. This view flies in the face of all serious studies of poverty and poor people. Poor people are just like everybody else. They have hopes and dreams; they wish for a decent life for themselves and their children; they will accept work if it is available; and they do not arrange their affairs wilfully with a view to relying on state support (Goodin, 1985).

The notion of “self” in self-sufficiency does not refer to the self as an individual as it is simply impossible for any individual to go through life completely self-sufficient. This Discussion Paper is dedicated to a policy of self-sufficiency or self-reliance which would, in effect, force people to rely on the family for support rather than the state (i.e., the boundaries of the ‘self’ are extended to include one’s family).

Shifting the welfare burden off onto families is an old familiar trick which originated in the Elizabethan Poor Laws. Although cherished by many politicians (e.g., Thatcher, Reagan), the goal of enforcing family responsibility has been a dismal failure for three pragmatic reasons.

First, family ties cannot be maintained or strengthened by legislation. Experience has shown that legislated family responsibility is “. . . often very painful to those in need of help . . . does not yield any returns in family solidarity, and . . . yields monetary returns which are far below the cost of litigation” (Judge and Mathews, 1980).

Second, to enforce family responsibility is to ignore the fact that most poor people are found in poor families. These families are in no better position to provide assistance than is the person requiring it (Goodin, 1985).

Finally, and paradoxically, by encouraging “self-reliance” on the part of recipients by making them seek help from their families, you may be *discouraging* self-reliance on the part of family benefactors. That is, by giving one’s savings, etc. to a family member, the benefactor may be putting him- or herself at risk.

Apart from these pragmatic points there is a principled objection to family responsibility provisions. Such provisions reduce public dependency only by increasing private dependency. In other words, people are made less dependent on the state by being more dependent on family assistance. This is a complete reversal of attempts to reduce the dependency of wives on husbands and children on parents. How do you reconcile this contradiction?

In sum, self-sufficiency is a pernicious doctrine. It does nothing to prevent vulnerability and dependency. On the contrary, it exacerbates the worst kind of dependency and violates some of our strongest moral responsibilities as a society.

Workfare and learnfare

This government has been receiving much attention for its so-called social experiments such as N.B. Works. The fact of the matter is that these experiments are not new as they too are based on Poor Law practices. The Americans have tried a number of workfare and learnfare programs over the past two decades. All serious studies of these projects have shown that they are dismal failures in getting people back into the labour market. The following are the major findings of these studies:

- not one new job is created by these programs
- the poverty and unemployment rates are not reduced
- graduates often go back on welfare because there are no jobs
- if graduates get a job, it is usually a part-time, low wage, dead-end job that keeps them in poverty and displaces someone else from the labour market
- participants are stigmatized by perpetuating the myth that unemployed people are lazy and only work when forced to do so
- punishes women most by not recognizing or valuing the crucial work of childrearing and homemaking unless someone comes into another's home to perform these tasks
- is a low-cost strategy compared to education, real job training and job creation

These programs are based on two assumptions: (1) that the poor have lost the work ethic (as the Premier believes); and/or (2) that people on welfare need an incentive to go to work. These assumptions, of course, fly in the face of all reason and evidence, but it begs a certain question which is not addressed in this Discussion Paper.

What conclusion will be drawn at the end of these experiments if the participants are not working? Politicians, such as Frank McKenna, may conclude that the participants, most of whom are women, do not have the work ethic and/or they do not respond to the "carrot", i.e., incentives. And, therefore, they need the "stick", that is, compulsory work programs, which the Premier has already stated he is *not* against. Compulsory programs do not create jobs or reduce poverty. They only blame and punish victims of our weak economy and ineffective government economic and labour market policies. The problem is a lack of jobs not a lack of the work ethic.

Alternatives

In closing we would point out that the problems of poverty, unemployment and scarce resources require bolder and larger changes than that of picking on poor people. The idea that Canada in general, and New Brunswick in particular, cannot afford an adequate and compassionate welfare state is incorrect. Canada spends much less on its social programs than most other OECD countries. It is not a problem of economics, it is a problem of political will. For starters, the federal and provincial governments could:

1. Reform the corporate welfare system (tax breaks, deferrals and loopholes for business) which is costing billions of dollars every year and which increase corporate profits rather than decrease unemployment.
2. Reform our Income Tax Act where 20 Canadian millionaires paid less than \$100 each in income tax three years in a row (1989-91) and where 190 Canadians who earned more than \$250,000 in 1991 paid no income tax.
3. Implement a full-employment policy similar to those of Sweden, Norway, Austria and Switzerland.
4. Implement a universal day care program and higher minimum wages which, along with a full-employment policy, are *real incentives* to get off welfare.

People on income assistance are not lazy. And, they are not morally inferior. Please stop treating them as if they were. We would again emphasize, the problem is not a lack of the work ethic; it is a lack of jobs and a lack of intelligent government policy to deal with it.

REFERENCES

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