

Perot's subsequent challenge) through calls for the inclusion of a social charter. If so, the proposals will, more than likely, be cosmetic. After all, a comprehensive social charter with strong enforcement mechanisms would undercut the very core of NAFTA itself, namely the investor's code. Moreover, both Clinton's and Dole's campaigns for the presidency will, in all likelihood, be heavily bankrolled by the same transnational corporations who, under the auspices of the US Business Round Table, brought us NAFTA in the first place. And since they, in turn, are among the 500 corporations which now control over 70 per cent of global trade in goods and services and the 350 of these that own half the total stock of direct foreign investment throughout the world, we can be assured that every effort will be made to see that any social charter proposals for the renegotiation of NAFTA are merely cosmetic devices.

If labour and social movements in Canada, Mexico and the US (as well as Chile) want to press for a renegotiation of NAFTA based on a social charter strategy, the package would be a comprehensive one with strong enforcement mechanisms, aimed at prying open and dismantling the core elements of the deal. In the end, this would be a more productive use of the politics of contradiction.

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Disabilities

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Quality of Life for Persons with Disabilities: A Building Code Issue

In January 1996, the Harris Government released "Back to Basics: A Consultation Paper on the Focus of the Ontario Building Code". It states that "the Government of Ontario has made a commitment to return Ontario to prosperity".¹ The consultation paper proposes to do so by eliminating accessibility requirements in buildings in order to cut development costs. The recommendations in this consultation paper appear to reflect the sentiments of large and small builders who have expressed concern that "the balance between public goals and cost-effectiveness of the Building Code has, in some cases, shifted".² These builders are concerned that some of the present Ontario Building Code requirements add extra expense to building costs.

The Ontario Building Code Act was first passed in 1974 and since then barrier-free access provisions have been broadened twice including changes in 1986 and 1990. The consultation paper "Back to Basics" proposes to set the clock back and eliminate more than twenty years of progress towards

accessibility for persons with disabilities. The rationale for this action is that builders are in a financial slump and they must find ways to cut their development costs. This financial situation can be viewed as an economic issue and not a building code issue and therefore should be addressed with economic policies and not with building code revisions. The Ontario Government should not be attempting to return Ontario to prosperity at the expense of one of the most vulnerable groups in our society, persons with physical disabilities.

It is misleading to assume that construction costs would be reduced if accessibility requirements were reduced. When accessibility is incorporated into the early design stages of new construction it need not cost more money. For example lever door handles are only minimally more expensive than door knobs and designing a doorway wide enough to accommodate the passage of a wheelchair does not increase the cost of the building. For those individuals who cannot grasp and twist a door knob, the ability to use an imprecise hand movement to press on a lever handle means the ability to move about in the built environment independently. Widened doorways allow the passage of wheelchair users to many areas including front entrances, washroom cubicles, meeting spaces and bedrooms. If this type of accessibility in the built environment is denied there will be a significant negative impact on the quality of life for persons with physical disabilities.

A number of disability and seniors' organizations have strongly opposed the principles outlined in the document "Back to Basics". Disabled Persons Community Resources in Ottawa-Carleton have lobbied the Ontario Government on behalf of the 15.5% of the population with disabilities. In February 1996 Disabled Persons Community Resources published a brief urging the Ontario Government to reconsider the principles outlined in "Back to Basics". This brief demands that accessibility requirements in the Ontario Building Code be preserved and improved upon in order to serve the needs of an ever growing aging population and to meet the needs of persons with physical disabilities.³

For example there is a need for Ontario Building Code accessibility requirements to become mandatory for single dwelling houses in order to allow seniors to age in their homes. There is also the need for the Ontario Building Code to incorporate emergency egress for persons with physical disabilities. The physical requirements of individuals with environmental hypersensitivities are completely neglected in the Ontario Building code. These issues and numerous other issues need to be addressed before the Ontario Building Code meets the functional needs of a larger, more inclusive group of persons with physical disabilities.

The Barrier Free Environment Program at Disabled Persons Community Resources assists the community in providing accessible services and

programs. There are numerous businesses, non-profit organizations and government departments that contact the organization every year requesting barrier-free environment assessments of their buildings or facilities and requesting recommendations for improving accessibility. These recommendations are far more expensive to implement after initial construction. These high costs provide a solid argument for an Ontario Building Code that should be based on long-term thinking and planning and not based on short-term financial gains for the builders.

The Ontario Government has consulted with builders in order to develop the principles outlined in the document "Back to Basics". When will the consultation begin with disability organisations and with persons with disabilities in order to obtain their perspective on the Ontario Building Code? This is of the utmost importance as the Ontario Building Code has a profound effect on the lives of persons with disabilities. It can limit or expand a person's involvement in and contribution to the life of their community. It is important not only to maintain the accessibility requirements presently in the Ontario Building Code, but also to raise these standards to ensure that the needs of all persons in the community are taken into account.

NOTES

- 1.. Ontario. Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Housing Development and Buildings Branch. *Back To Basics: A Consultation Paper on the Focus of the Ontario Building Code*, Toronto, 1996, p. 3.
- 2.. Ibid.
- 3.. Disabled Persons Community Resources. *Response to the Consultation Paper "Back to Basics"*, Toronto, 1996.



Labour

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Government budgets are about making choices — economic, social, and cultural choices. They are political choices because they shape the kind of country we will live in. For more than a decade, under both Conservative and Liberal federal governments, Canadians have been told that there is only one choice which can be made for the federal government budget. That choice has been to make massive cuts to social programmes and eliminate thousands of public sector jobs. We are told that this is necessary, to reduce the federal deficit and debt, and to keep inflation low, which further aids deficit reduction.

To achieve this, full employment as an economic strategy has been abandoned in favour of deliberate, high unemployment and high interest rates.