



Edmonton Social Planning Council

Social policy and the elections of 2004

Commentaries

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During the three elections we've had this year, the Edmonton Social Planning Council has encouraged community dialogue around how the various orders of government address the social issues of our day. In the election bulletins we published this year, we invited colleagues and experts in the field to comment on the kinds of social policies governments need to develop in order to promote healthy, just and inclusive communities.

Now that the elections are over and governments are beginning to address their new mandates, we have the opportunity to provide constructive input into public policy in our city, province and country. The commentaries from the election bulletins can continue to contribute to this process and so we have re-published them here. We think you'll find that the insights and perspectives they provided during the elections are just as relevant now as we prepare for a new cycle of governing and policy-making.

Social policy and the federal government

Responsibility vs. jurisdiction

*by Ricardo Acuña, executive director of the **Parkland Institute**, an Alberta-wide public policy research and education network situated at the University of Alberta.*

The Constitution Act of 1982 assigns equally to the federal government and the provincial governments the task of "promoting equal opportunities for the well-being of Canadians." In the same section of the Constitution, however, the federal government is given the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that all Canadians are provided with "reasonably comparable levels of public services."

What this means is that, regardless of the allocations of federal and provincial jurisdiction, it is ultimately the federal government which is entrusted by Canadians to act on their behalf as stewards of the common good – to ensure that no Canadian, regardless of geographic location, is denied access to any of those goods and services that we hold common, and which in many ways, define us.

It is this same premise that informs the likes of the Canada Health Act, the Canada Health and Social Transfer, and numerous other federal government acts, laws, and policies. This is how the federal government fulfills the responsibilities assigned to it in the Canadian Constitution, and it is a crucial element in ensuring and maintaining a decent quality of life for all Canadians – be they in Alberta, Newfoundland or Nunavut.

In its recent drive to cut funding, however, the federal government has stepped away from this responsibility. It has reduced the amount of funding available to provinces for health and social programs, and perhaps more importantly, it has been reluctant to get involved by ensuring that provincial programs meet minimum standards. As a result, there is now tremendous inequality and disparity in the level and quality of public services and social programs available to Canadians in different parts of the country. Not only does this go against the spirit of the Constitution, it is unacceptable in terms of what it has meant for the quality of life of poor Canadians living in jurisdictions who have stripped their programs to reprehensible levels.

It is time for the federal government to once again step up to the plate with increased funding for social programs across the country to ensure humane minimum levels of support. This funding, however, will only have the necessary impact if it is accompanied by strong legislation and enforcement of those minimum standards across the country. Certainly, many in a province like Alberta will argue that to do so would be a serious infringement of provincial jurisdiction, but the truth is quite the opposite. By playing a greater role in developing, funding and enforcing social policy and programs in Canada, the federal government would simply be fulfilling the role assigned to it within the Canadian Constitution – a role that exists independent of provincial jurisdiction. It is a role that must be taken seriously for the good of all Canadians.

Social policy and the civic government

Help wanted: city councillors with a social conscience

by Allan Bolstad, former City of Edmonton City Councillor

One of my goals in each civic election was to spend a considerable amount of time door knocking in the poorest parts of the constituency. Not that this was a very smart move politically. In fact, as I went from house to apartment to house in the Delwood and Spruce Avenue communities of Ward 2, I was acutely aware that very few of these people were likely to vote. Few of them knew that an election was underway. Few of them knew who I was - despite the fact I had been in office a number of years already. And a good percentage had little interest in local government.

But I made a point of going up and down these streets anyway. Why? I knew these areas needed help. I felt it was important that I see and hear first hand about the problems these people were facing and what they thought needed to be done.

There is no question our city has growing social problems. The big challenge, of course, is to find some ways to address these issues. For that, I look back on the success the city has had developing various partnerships. I remember about 10 years ago when city council debated whether to spend \$50,000 on a school hot lunch program. Together, with other partners, that initiative has grown into a \$1.5 million program (the city's share is now about \$140,000) and goes a long

way toward ensuring that young people from disadvantaged homes have something decent to eat so they can learn properly at school. A similar story is beginning to unfold with affordable housing, where the city's annual investment of \$1.3 million has turned into a multi-million dollar exercise (in partnership with the provincial and federal governments).

City Council is also able to lobby other orders of government, as it is currently doing on the issue of the minimum wage, asking the province to raise it to \$7/hour from its national low of \$5.90/hour. And despite its limited resources, Edmonton can sometimes go it alone as it did recently with lowering the monthly bus pass price for AISH recipients.

But all of these initiatives take some courage and commitment by members of City Council. They demand that members of council have some understanding of the social issues facing our community and the need to do something about it. And for that, members of council need to go looking. They need to door-knock in the poorer parts of town. They need to talk to people running homeless shelters. It's not likely to get them many votes. And that's a huge conundrum, given the workings of our political system. But you need councilors who are willing to do it, if you want a city that works for everyone.

Social policy and the provincial government

Is it time for an Alberta Social Policy Heritage Fund?

*by Karim Jamal, Alexander Hamilton Professor of Business,
University of Alberta*

A central feature of the Alberta budget is the province's reliance on a very volatile stream of resource revenues. A provincial government absolutely committed to avoiding a budget deficit has thus chosen a low level of regular program spending to avoid even a remote possibility of going into a deficit. While it is possible to reduce the volatility of revenue, the steps required to achieve this such as diversifying the economy, a provincial sales tax, or resource royalty payments that are not tied to the price of oil and gas, require a long time horizon, and are politically unpopular and thus unlikely to be adopted by any political party. During the current election, it is unlikely that any significant change can be made in voters' desire for avoiding deficits, or in the volatility of the province's revenue cycle.

A strategy of keeping regular spending low will thus generate a budget surplus in most years, with very large surpluses in some years. The key political issue is to decide how these surpluses will be used.

At the present time, some of the surplus is used for discretionary spending in various social programs that are popular with voters, such as healthcare, K-12 education, and road construction. The remainder of the surplus is saved in the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust

Fund (AHSTF). Spending money to help poor people is not currently politically popular, so it is unlikely that any of the surplus will be devoted to alleviating poverty.

One way to direct a part of the surplus to alleviating poverty is by setting up an Alberta Social Policy Heritage Fund. Designating a percentage of the provincial surplus for social policy purposes will alleviate the need to constantly ask politicians to devote resources to poverty programs that do not translate into added votes.

A drive by the Chamber of Commerce to have local businesses provide contributions which can be matched by the provincial government could help set up a public-private partnership to help the poor in our community. In some communities in the U.S. (e.g., Minneapolis) it is common for local businesses to join a program where they agree to contribute a fixed percentage of their profit to local charities.

An Alberta Social Policy Heritage Fund Board can ensure that funds are directed to those living in poverty and who lack sophisticated advocacy and fund raising capabilities. A partnership with a business group like the Chamber of Commerce can provide funding, political support, and managerial expertise to social policy related organizations.

Elections 2004 Statistics

Voter Turnout

Federal election

Canada 60.9%

Alberta 58.9%

Newfoundland and Labrador 49.3%

PEI 70.8%

Provincial election

46.23% (lowest in Alberta history)

Civic election

Edmonton: 41.79%

Popular Vote

Federal election in Alberta

Conservative Party: 61.7%

Liberal Party: 22%

NDP: 9.5%

Green Party: 6.1%

Alberta election

PC Party: 47%

Liberal Party: 29%

NDP: 10%

Alliance Party: 9%

Green Party: 3%

Civic Election/Mayor

Stephen Mandel: 40.68%

Bill Smith: 32.57%

Robert Noce: 24.93%

The social policy 'cabinet'

Canada

Ken Dryden, Minister of Social Development Canada
Tony Ianno, Minister of State (Families and Caregivers)
Joe Volpe, Minister of Human Resources and Skills
Development Canada
Claudette Bradshaw, Minister of State (Human Resources Development)
Joseph Frank Fontana, Minister of Labour and Housing
Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Public Health

Alberta

Mike Cardinal, Minister of Human Resources and
Employment
Yvonne Fritz, Minister of Seniors and Community
Supports (includes Housing and AISH)
Heather Forsyth, Minister of Children's Services

Edmonton

The city's new mayor, Stephen Mandel, has appointed an informal 'cabinet' with each of the city councillors being given responsibility for various issues. Here are some of the 'Mayor's Special Initiatives' (as reported in the *Edmonton Journal*, Dec. 8/04).

Affordable Housing: Karen Liebovici, Michael Phair
Aboriginal Issues: Ron Hayter
Immigration: Michael Phair
Mayor's Drug Strategy: Janice Melnychuk
Neighborhood Revitalization: Janice Melnychuk
Senior's Issues: Linda Sloan

Social policy and the federal government

Who is responsible for social programs?

*by Loleen Berdahl, Director of Research for the **Canada West Foundation**, an independent, non-profit public policy research institute based in Calgary. (This is an excerpt from a previously published article titled 'Core Responsibilities')*

Canadian governments must better respect the existing division of roles and responsibilities. Federal and provincial governments should become more aware of the impact of their policies on urban areas, and be highly sensitive to the fact that if they fail to fully address policy issues within their own domain (such as social programs), the result may be increased pressure on municipal governments. Municipal governments should, as much as possible, avoid increasing their engagement in areas outside their core responsibilities.

More and more, municipal governments are being drawn into providing such things as affordable housing, homeless shelters and similar social policy functions.

Cities are already grappling to deal with maintaining and expanding infrastructure, an expensive proposition for rapidly growing cities like Edmonton and Calgary.

Adding income redistributive programs on top of these challenges simply intensifies the pressure. It is no wonder that cities are voicing their concerns about urban finance.

So why are municipal governments getting involved in income redistributive programs if they lack the financial resources? The answer is simple: municipal governments are trying to protect the well-being of their cities. When federal and provincial governments fail to address urban social issues outside municipal responsibility (such as affordable housing and homelessness), public demands emerge for municipal governments to step into their place. These demands are coupled with a very strong municipal awareness that cities bear the social and economic brunt should these policy fields be ignored.

The political reality is that if provincial and federal governments do not address their own policy areas, municipal governments are left with extensive de facto residual responsibilities. This is not a sustainable position for cities.

What is needed is a long, hard look at the allocation of roles, responsibilities and resources between governments in Canada. Perhaps municipal governments, at least those in big cities, are in the best position to provide income redistributive programs. If this is true, there needs to be a re-balancing of the existing division of responsibilities between the three orders of government – and significant changes in the distribution of revenues to cover the costs of the changed responsibilities.

Social policy and the civic government

Leadership, choices and Edmonton's social deficit

*by Judith A. Garber, Associate Professor of Political Science,
University of Alberta*

Edmonton's mayor and council members can make a meaningful contribution to resolving the city's social deficit. They must first acknowledge that such a deficit exists. Edmonton has undergone a period of rapid growth, where the city's population has become more diverse and its social needs more pressing. Once this is acknowledged, then the mayor and councillors must make a collective political investment in issues such as affordable housing and civic engagement that comes close to the attention they give to road-building and cat licensing.

Like all Canadian cities, Edmonton is legally and constitutionally constrained in its ability to marshal resources to address complex problems located even within its boundaries – e.g. child poverty in inner-city neighborhoods. Cities are also limited by conditions that originate across governmental boundaries or levels – e.g. sprawling development or settling immigrants. Such issues are impossible for a city to resolve, since no single actor can produce intergovernmental coordination.

These limitations do not fully explain though, the fact that within the governing choices that are available, pressing the province and federal government for infrastructure funding for roads and stadiums has taken

precedence over seeking funding to mitigate homelessness. Likewise, property tax increases are always treated as more unacceptable than addressing the increasing stress on public recreation facilities, two issues that fall equally within municipal authority.

Putting social issues on the local policy agenda cannot be the responsibility of a few members of city council working individually with community groups and nonprofits. Unfortunately, this situation has characterized Edmonton's recent councils. As well, an engaged, visionary mayor cannot substitute for the collective leadership of council (the election of which presupposes voters who themselves give priority to aspects of the social deficit and demand social inclusion).

Nonetheless, the mayor, as the elected official with a citywide mandate, must make it his/her central task the building of local and intergovernmental support for social inclusion policies. The importance of this role is highlighted at a moment when there is possibly greater federal receptiveness to urban needs than there has been in the quarter century since the abolishment of the federal Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. And Canada's cities are now loudly demanding a seat at the grownups table.

If the election fails to generate the leadership to direct a significant amount of the city's energies towards the social deficit, it will not be because council lacks the tools to do so.

Social policy and the provincial government

Elimination of poverty: a political goal

*by Bill Moore-Kilgannon, Executive Director of **Public Interest Alberta**, a new provincial advocacy organization committed to public services, institutions and spaces.*

While the current Alberta government is boasting that they have eliminated the debt, they have done so by creating a serious social and infrastructure debt that only serves to accelerate the growing gap between rich and poor. If we are going to successfully eliminate poverty in this province, we need to challenge this situation and develop a comprehensive strategy to resolve it.

This will involve working together to advocate for:

- Increasing the minimum wage, establishing the Market Basket Measure as a baseline for funding welfare and AISH, and work with all levels of government to put in place a low income housing strategy.
- Making sure that everyone has equal access to quality health care that recognizes the importance of both preventative and mental health. This also will mean that we work together to stop any economic barriers to care like the proposed health insurance deductibles.
- Building an education system that has the resources and staffing that gives all children the opportunity they need to reach their potential. Specifically, establishing full day kindergarten and junior kindergarten programs would really help children in

- poverty to get the education foundation they need.
- Supporting a post-secondary education system that is open to all Albertans regardless of their economic status and gives students a quality education that will allow them to get work in emerging sectors of the economy. We must make sure post-secondary institutions do not turn away thousands of students each year or force those students who do get in to accumulate massive student loans.
- Having a co-ordinated delivery of a continuum of services for families with young children, aged 0 – 6. This must include comprehensive pre- and post-natal programs, supports for effective parenting, early intervention programs for families with children at risk, affordable quality child care for working parents and wide spread access to early learning programs and supports.
- Working to establish programs and policies that are targeted to different sectors of society that are affected by poverty. This means that we need to address the unique issues of poverty as it relates to seniors, farmers, women, aboriginal people and newcomers to Canada.

Public Interest Alberta is interested in building a strong provincial network of organizations and individuals that will be able to take this integrated and comprehensive approach to transform the political culture of the province and make the elimination of poverty a political goal for all Albertans.

Recommended social policy reading

More Money in Their Pockets: Pragmatism, Politics and Poverty in Alberta: Why ESPC challenges Alberta to adopt the Market Basket Measure. This Position Paper by the Edmonton Social Planning Council is available on our website at www.edmspc.com or in hard copy upon request at 423-2031.

The new Canada Social Transfer: Impetus for a renewed era of innovative social policy in Canada? Speech by Roy Romanow to the Canadian Council on Social Development available on-line at www.ccsd.ca/pr/2004/social_transfer/romanow.htm.

Social Determinants of Health: Canadian Perspectives, edited by Dennis Raphael (Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., Toronto, 2004). This collection of essays from academics and experts summarizes and analyzes how socio-economic factors affect the health of Canadians.

Inclusive Cities Canada: www.inclusivecities.ca ESPC is one of five social planning councils from across Canada to be involved in this national initiative. Our work aims to enhance social inclusion in Canadian cities so that all citizens can participate in economic and social life.