

June
2004



Edmonton Social Planning Council

Social policy and the 2004 federal election

ELECTION BULLETIN June 2004

Poverty and related social issues are not getting much attention in this federal election campaign. So the Edmonton Social Planning Council is publishing this election bulletin in an attempt to bring these matters to the forefront. To provide some context we are asking a 'big picture' question that is answered by two respected Alberta-based research organizations (see the 1st and last pages of this bulletin.)

Then on pages 2 & 3 we have asked local candidates of the four political parties running candidates in every Edmonton-area riding to summarize their party's platforms on several specific social issues.

Responding on behalf of their parties are:

Conrad Bitangcol,
Greens, Edmonton-St. Albert

Rahim Jaffer,
Conservatives, Edmonton-Strathcona

Anne McLellan,
Liberals, Edmonton-Centre

Janina Strudwick,
New Democrats, Edmonton-East

What should the federal government's role be in developing, funding and enforcing social policy and programs in Canada?

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

See PARKLAND / Continued on page 4

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.

See CANADA WEST / Continued on page 4

Child Poverty

In 1989 an all-party resolution was passed in the House of Commons aiming for Canada to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000.. But over one million children still live in poverty in our country (2003 Report Card on Child Poverty in Canada, Campaign 2000). Should the National Child Benefit (now amounting to as much as \$2500 per child per year) be increased significantly so that child poverty can finally be eliminated? Should other federal programs be introduced to help achieve this goal?

Conservative Party

The current personal tax system does not give any help to middle-income parents raising children. Families with children pay the same taxes as those with the same income, but no children. A Conservative government would increase fairness and reduce the taxburden by introducing a deduction for all dependent children under age 16. We will introduce a \$2000 per child deduction, phased in over four years.

Green Party

The Green Party is fully opposed to child poverty in Canada and we need to work towards a solution. We need to look at issues such as a graduated welfare system, publicly funded universal daycare, access to education and building strong communities with strong local economies where people can work and be paid a living wage and/or be guaranteed a basic minimum allowance.

Liberal Party

A Liberal government will build on the current annual \$13 billion federal investment towards helping children which includes the Child Tax Benefit (to be increased to \$3,240 per child by 2008.) A Liberal Government will further create Foundations - The National Early Learning and Child Care Program which will phase in \$5 billion over the next five years to ensure that children have access to high quality government regulated spaces.

New Democratic Party

We recommend increasing the Child Tax Benefit to \$4,900 per child and altering the program to permit Canada's poorest families, who don't pay tax, to qualify. We also are advocating on behalf of Canadians who make less than \$15,000 a year for them to pay no federal income tax.

'New Deal' for Cities

Canada's cities are financially strapped and are faced with crumbling physical and social infrastructures (roads, transit, affordable housing, environment). They have been calling for a "new deal" from the federal government that would give them a large and secure source of funding. Should the federal government be the level of government to provide the funding to help the cities deal with this problem?

Conservative Party

We will negotiate a transfer of at least three cents of federal fuel excise tax to the provinces through a national infrastructure agreement. It will phase out the Canada Strategic Infrastructure Fund and other federally run infrastructure programs, while retaining the Border Infrastructure Program. This will enhance federal infrastructure such as airports, ports, and the National Highway System.

Green Party

Municipalities are the level of democracy closest to the people, but have never been granted the resources or power to act. The Green Party will: support a grassroots movement to create municipal charters; create new funding networks for more locally-run housing, childcare and health care programs; negotiate an agreement to redirect a share of federal tax revenues toward municipal issues.

Liberal Party

The Liberal platform includes a New Deal for cities and communities that commits to formally involving municipalities in pre-budget consultations; extend co-operative partnerships among federal, provincial and municipal governments; and establishes a plan to share a portion of the federal gas tax that will increase over the next five years to at least \$2 billion. Plus, our 2004 federal budget eliminated the GST on municipal expenditures.

New Democratic Party

We propose sharing half the federal gas tax with cities for sustainable transportation in a way that does not depend on matching funds from the provinces. We also believe in a permanent national infrastructure program so that accountable local governments can own and deliver clean drinking water and waste reduction programs. All municipalities, not just cities, should receive a full refund on the GST as well as a portion of the federal gasoline tax.

Affordable Low-Income Housing

Since the mid 1980s the federal government has largely abandoned what previously had been a successful social housing strategy. For cities such as Edmonton this has resulted in a huge shortage of affordable housing for low-income individuals and households. Should the federal government step in and fund a long term affordable housing program?

Conservative Party

We believe that providing income supports to needy Canadians is superior to building social housing to deal with homelessness. We believe that any homelessness initiative should address the mental health and addiction issues that often lead to homelessness.

Green Party

The Green Party will: introduce housing legislation to ensure every person is guaranteed adequate housing; model housing legislation on postwar Britain, where the labor government built masses of social housing units; revive a program that will provide credit and loan guarantees to non-profit housing organizations and cooperatives for the building and restoration of quality, energy efficient housing.

Liberal Party

The Federal government has already committed more than \$2 billion for various assisted housing programs up to 2008, and will increase that by up to \$1.5 billion over the next five years. These include: capital grant and housing renovation programs aimed to increase the number of affordable rental housing units; capital funding on a cost-sharing basis for local community groups offering supportive services and facilities for the homeless.

New Democratic Party

Jack Layton has published a book on the topic recommending the reinstatement of a 10 year housing program to build 200,000 affordable and co-op housing units (including homes for seniors, people with disabilities and students). This would also include renovating 100,000 existing units, and providing rent supplements to 40,000 low-income tenants, many of whom are single mothers who pay a large percentage of their income in rent.

Canada Social Transfer

The Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) was split as of April 1, 2004 (at the recommendation of the Romanow Commission) in order to facilitate the tracking of how the province's spend the federal health and social money. How tightly should the now separate Canada Social Transfer money be controlled and tracked?

Conservative Party

We support the splitting of the Canadian Health and Social Transfer into its two components: health and social. We will then negotiate with the provinces to ensure that the social transfer is properly distributed among educational and other priorities.

Green Party

There should be fewer ties to transfer money between Federal Government and the Provinces, but the question is if the transfer money would be used efficiently by the provinces. One of the Green Party's ten key values is decentralization. According to this value, funds would be distributed directly to the municipality because local people should solve local situations.

Liberal Party

The controls that are now in place through the Canada Social Transfer and Canada Health Transfer (formerly the CHST) help ensure that all Canadians receive reasonably comparable levels of public services, wherever they live. The new transfers will enable the contributions to health care to be more transparent and thereby more accountable to Canadians. The new structure was announced in the 2004 budget.

New Democratic Party

The conditions on federal social transfer money can impose limitations on the range of programs and the funding proportions. While the NDP supports the initiatives sponsored by the program, more needs to be done to ensure that a diversity of services and assistance are offered with appropriately targeted funding.

Social policy and the 2004 federal election

What should the federal government's role be in developing, funding and enforcing social policy and programs in Canada?

Links to other organizations providing election information

Campaign 2000: "Key Promises to Address Child and Family Poverty in Canada"
www.campaign2000.ca

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives: "Can They Pay For What They Say?"
www.policyalternatives.ca

Citizens for Public Justice: "What's This About Accountability?"
www.cpj.ca

Vote For A Change: "A Voter Education Campaign for Peace and Justice"
www.voteforachange.ca



Edmonton Social Planning Council
www.edmspc.com
780.423.2031

Parkland Institute: a greater role for feds

Continued from page 1

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.

Canada West Foundation: a rebalancing of existing roles?

Continued from page 1

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.