



Making the Case for Making the Case*

In its 2012 Budget, Ottawa announced – with no warning – that it was dismantling the National Council of Welfare. This body had been set up by the federal government in 1962 to provide advice to the Minister responsible for income security in Canada. Its purpose was to conduct high-quality research on poverty and to ensure that citizen voices were heard at the highest level of policy deliberation.

To this day, I have not been able to find the actual reference to the slated closure. The death sentence is buried somewhere in the bowels of the massive ‘Omnibus Bill’ and almost went virtually unnoticed.

When we heard the news, the Caledon Institute decided after much deliberation to rescue the work of the Council. My colleague Ken Battle and I had worked at the National Council of Welfare in the 1980s and had developed the methodologies employed in several of its reports.

There was one Council study that we knew was particularly important – because it almost never came to be. The Council had decided to write a report on welfare, which acts

as the income program of last resort for Canadians with no other means of financial support.

Not so fast. The Council faced the wrath of several officials who were not keen (read ‘they were furious’) to open the books on this hidden system. Secrecy served the interests of governments and administrators who had the power to make and enforce – with no question or interference – the countless regulations that govern welfare.

We set out to explain the structure of this program and its many rules, which determine both eligibility and expectations around work performance. We also wanted to figure out how each province and territory calculated its respective welfare rates.

Turns out, the rules were far more convoluted than we had ever imagined and the rates of assistance were far lower than we ever thought possible. Over time, the welfare study became a powerful weapon in the war on poverty because it provided the evidence to make the case for improved rates of assistance and more profound welfare reform.

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The original report subsequently evolved into the detailed methodology that is still used today – and that almost was lost forever. We at Caledon were not prepared to see this happen because we knew first-hand how difficult it had been to decode the various rules and rate structures in the first place.

But there was one not-so-minor problem: Caledon had to fund this vital research on our own. We decided to make our case public to see whether any concerned supporters could chip in to assist with this rescue mission.

We had heard about the crowdfunding route, which involves making public a given cause and asking many, many people for modest sums of money. There is no amount too small. The wealth in this case derives from the power of networks to get the word out and to have multiple hands – and pockets – sharing the burden of the problem. The challenge was that no campaign had ever before been undertaken in support of a piece of social research.

Perhaps equally important to the money is the message about the underlying problem. The death of the National Council of Welfare is the thin edge of a far bigger wedge: the loss in recent years of many vital sources of national information.

The termination of the long-form Census and its replacement by the voluntary National Household Survey have proven disastrous in terms of solid evidence for good policy decisions. The recently-published poverty data is especially suspect. The associated loss of several national surveys, including the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, means that we no longer can track participation of individuals in the labour market over time and have no way of measuring the dynamics of poverty.

No citizen in this country can afford to remain idle as Ottawa strips away our most important collective resource – publicly available information about who we are and the reforms required to ensure a good quality life for all Canadians. There is no better time than now to make this case.

Sherri Torjman

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Caledon Institute of Social Policy

1354 Wellington Street West, 3rd Floor
Ottawa, ON K1Y 3C3
CANADA

Tel/Fax: (613) 729-3340

E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org

Website: www.caledoninst.org

Twitter: @CaledonINST