

## Shifting Gears on the Social Highway

There is a major problem on the social highway. Most of the country is stuck in one lane.

We just can't seem to get off the welfare track. Our public debates are congested with the issues of welfare dependency, workfare and welfare fraud.

It's time to shift gears and head in a new direction. Maybe then we can get on with the real concerns facing this country. One of the most important and neglected is the well-being of children.

How many Canadians are aware of the fact that our country has signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child? Probably not many – we're too busy exploring the merits of work for welfare.

We have had precious little national discussion on the overall purpose of this Convention, let alone its specific provisions. How many of us – federal politicians included – can name what Ottawa has done in respect of our signa-

ture on this document? More importantly, how many have made an effort to apply the Convention's principles in our own homes, schools and communities?

Despite our relative wealth, Canada has an astounding rate of child poverty. At last count, close to 1.3 million children under age 18 lived in low-income families. One in five Canadian children is poor.

The devastating impact of poverty upon health and development is well documented. Poor kids have higher than average rates of ill health and accidents. They tend to perform worse at school (many can't learn properly because they're hungry). They have higher than average school drop-out rates. This educational legacy translates into bleak job prospects and low incomes down the road. The cycle of poverty continues.

Moreover, our other national obsession – the fiscal deficit – has diverted our attention from an equally important deficit that has become the bane of the industrialized world. The time

deficit. Working parents are caught in the squeeze of finding enough hours in the day to balance economic pressures with children's emotional and intellectual development. Parents struggle daily in a culture which provides very little support for juggling work and family responsibilities.

In announcing a comprehensive review of social programs, the federal government has opened a window – if not a door – of opportunity to focus national attention upon children and to take action that represents a real commitment.

First, it can act as a model employer by adopting a range of family-supportive policies and practices. These include flexible hours, part-time work with prorated benefits, compressed work weeks, job sharing, special family-related leave and extended maternity leave.

Second, Ottawa can support low-cost programs which have big-bang results. These include a national breakfast program in selected schools, early screening for learning and developmental disabilities, and preschool centres for parents and children.

Third, it can invest in child care services. The Liberal *Red Book* promised this investment only if economic growth exceeds three percent. The growth-over-three trigger fails to recognize that putting money into child care is itself an economic stimulus. Affordable, high quality child care helps families participate in the labour force and employs child care workers.

Fourth, the government can land a solid punch on poverty by better targeting to poor families the money it now spends on the federal child tax benefit. Ideally, it would enrich this area of expenditure as well. At the very least, it should restore full indexation to the child benefit. Thanks to partial indexation introduced by the

Tories, the benefit not only loses value every year but also catches fewer families in its fold. Billions of dollars have been silently siphoned out of the child benefits budget since 1986.

Fifth, Ottawa can also reduce poverty by protecting children from the loss of parental support resulting from family break-up. The federal government should continue to work actively with the provinces to ensure that child support orders are enforced.

Finally, the federal government should examine its tax treatment of families to offset some of the costs of raising children. Ottawa spends billions on tax breaks – such as high limits on RRSP deductions – that favour high-income households, including those without children. It's time we recouped some of that money to help middle-income and working poor families shouldering the burden of stagnating wages and rising taxes.

The social review is pivotal in that it can act as a catalyst for a cultural commitment to children. If the review accomplishes nothing other than a national traffic change, at least it will have set the right wheels in motion.

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