

## Bleeding Hearts and Heads

There is no excuse for the shocking violence taking place on the streets of London. The rioters and looters have destroyed the livelihoods of many innocent, hard-working people who must now – in their words – “start their lives from scratch.”

While there are no excuses, there certainly are explanations for these angry rampages.

For years, a burgeoning body of international literature has been warning about the potential unrest bubbling beneath the surface of so-called “prosperous” societies. Ironically, the roots of this work derive from a decades-old, landmark study of public servants in the UK.

The pioneering British research concluded that the psychological and physical damage resulting from being at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder can be devastating. Civil servants in the junior ranks were three times more likely to die in a year than col-

leagues from senior ranks, with a sliding gradation from top to bottom. Life prospects were far better at the top.

The UK results have stood the test of time. Subsequent findings have shown that social status has a powerful effect on health and well-being. Exhaustive evidence from around the world leads to the same conclusion: Extreme inequality is bad for both individuals and nations.

Societies marked by significant inequality sooner or later pay the price. Regardless of a nation’s wealth, it will be more dysfunctional, violent and unhealthy from both physical and emotional perspectives if the gap between income groups grows too wide.

Governments ignore this evidence at their peril. As the new safe harbour in the worldwide financial storm, Canadians risk complacency about the state of their own economic waters.

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At last count in 2009, close to 3.2 million – one in 10 Canadians – lived on low incomes. This national average masks the fact that certain groups, including Aboriginal people, recent immigrants and persons with disabilities, face an even greater risk of poverty. These are the households that spend a disproportionate amount of their limited income on the basics of food, clothing and shelter. Every day is a stressful struggle just to get by. They choose between feeding the kids and paying the rent.

Yet there is more to poverty than just being poor. Who gets how much is an equally crucial factor.

Recent numbers should be a wake-up call to all developed nations. Over the past quarter-century, earnings of the wealthy in Canada grew by 16 percent while those of the poor dropped by 21 percent. The same pattern of widening divide has been seen throughout the industrialized world.

Governments have a crucial role to play in fighting the growing gap. Fortunately, there are several key levers at their disposal to tackle the problem.

Income security programs and a progressive income tax system narrow the gap between Canada's poor and well-off by raising low incomes and counteracting the rising inequality rooted in employment earnings, private pensions and investments. The foundations to tackle poverty and inequality do not have to be built – just built upon.

But tackling poverty and inequality are not the only required responses. Implementing measures that target social exclusion is equally important. Social exclusion is a concept that gets very little airtime – except

when it rears its ugly head in the form of violent riots.

A sense of exclusion derives from feelings of limited opportunity. There is nothing to gain – and nothing to lose. Those who write off social exclusion as a “wooly concept” of concern only to bleeding hearts must now pay attention – to the bleeding heads on the streets.

Confronting racism and systemic discrimination is a key step. Racialized Canadians, Aboriginal people and persons with disabilities have been on the sidelines of society for far too long. Decent affordable housing is a long-acknowledged need. Jobs, recreational opportunities and a voice in local decisions all are vital remedies to tackling social exclusion.

And the solutions must go beyond governments to involve the private sector, voluntary organizations and citizens themselves. Entire communities must be engaged in combating social exclusion. At the end of the day, bleeding heads are everyone's business.

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