



## The New Public Pollicy

Last year, the federal government spent \$12 million on public polls and focus groups to seek Canadians' opinions on its performance. Ironically, the new public 'pollicy' comes at a time when many serious problems already have been identified as crucial areas for investment. The money spent on focus groups focusses thoughts on how this money could have been better spent on urgent social needs. While \$12 million is just a small fraction of the federal budget, it is a huge amount in this every-dollar-counts world.

### ***1. The child benefit intended to ensure that poor kids have enough to eat.***

One in five Canadian children lives in a low-income family. Compared to 1989, when the House of Commons passed its Resolution to work towards eliminating child poverty by the year 2000, there are now 482,000 *more* poor children. The Canada Child Tax Benefit is the primary means to bolster the income of low-income households.

### ***2. The salaries of child care workers now paid less than zookeepers.***

Child care is more than a babysitting service. High-quality child care promotes the physical,

intellectual, social and emotional development of young children. Despite its importance, child care has been noticeably absent from the public agenda. The current federal approach – tax breaks for receipted expenses – does nothing to build the supply of good child care. A first step would be to increase the salaries of child care workers whose low pay unfortunately reflects the importance attributed to their work.

### ***3. Early childhood development so that all kids get the best start in life.***

To the extent that children's primary needs are met, they are likely to develop into competent, healthy, productive and responsible adults. Child psychiatrists have documented the results of low investment in children's needs: greater incidence of reported child abuse, higher levels of illiteracy and school drop-out, and more adolescent suicides.

### ***4. Reinstatement of some funds bled from medicare.***

The Liberals introduced a new financing arrangement for health care, postsecondary education, welfare and social services in the form of the Canada Health and Social Transfer. The CHST,

which took effect April 1, 1996, cut \$7 billion in cash transfers from the provinces in its first two years alone. Medicare cannot be protected and reformed unless there are sufficient funds to ensure the availability and delivery of high-quality health care services.

**5. Home care for many thousands discharged from hospital the day of their operation.**

It is now common practice to discharge patients from hospital quickly to save costs and free up scarce beds. Many individuals report being sent home from hospital in a semi-stupor, barely able to walk. Early discharge is not bad in itself as long as there is access to adequate home care – a scarce resource in this no-money-for-social-supports era.

**6. Respite for caregivers of a sick or disabled family member.**

Respite provides relief to the individuals – usually women – who care at home for an ill or severely disabled relative. Not only do these caregivers work for no pay (because they are family members) but they often give up paid work and future pensions. These caregivers are very much alone in the exhaustion and pressures they face. Budget cuts have made this support more limited than ever.

**7. Supports for persons with disabilities who face barriers everywhere they turn.**

Canadians with disabilities face personal, social and economic disadvantages that prevent access to the same opportunities as other Canadians. Physical barriers make it difficult to participate in the mainstream. Lack of supports, such as technical aids and personal assistance, keep many people with disabilities out of the workplace. Negative attitudes reinforce the view that ‘disability’ means ‘no ability.’

**8. Relief for low- and modest-income households that have borne the heaviest burden of rising income, sales and payroll taxes.**

Partial deindexation of the income tax system has imposed an inflation tax on all taxpayers, but the working poor and modest-income Canadians have been hardest hit. The GST credit is also losing ground to inflation. Changes to Employment Insurance financing will increase the relative burden of premiums on lower-wage workers. They also will bear a disproportionate burden of Canada Pension Plan contributions, slated to rise substantially under the new ‘partial funding’ arrangement.

**9. Restoration of Employment Insurance which now excludes the majority of unemployed.**

Continuing cuts to Employment Insurance mean that fewer Canadians than ever qualify for this traditional first line of defence when they lose their jobs. In 1989, 87 percent of the unemployed were beneficiaries of regular unemployment payments. In every province west of Quebec, fewer than half the unemployed now collect regular benefits. In Ontario, the figure has fallen from 60 percent in 1989 to 34 percent in 1996 – the lowest coverage since the introduction of the program.

**10. Funding for communities left to cope with the fallout from governments that claim they have no money for social investment.**

*Sherri Torjman*

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