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Child Poverty Continues to Be Our National Shame

Twenty-five years have passed since Canadian leaders made a landmark commitment to this country's most vulnerable residents: its children. On November 24, 1989 all parties in the House of Commons unanimously passed a resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. Ed Broadbent, Leader of the NDP who sponsored the motion, called child poverty our national shame.

Canada is now fourteen years overdue on its pledge to eliminate child poverty and the situation has developed from a national shame into a national crisis. Not only did Canada fail to meet the target, many believe that as a country we've fallen back. On November 24, Campaign 2000, a cross-Canada public education movement, will release its annual report cards looking at the status of child and youth poverty in Canada.

Currently, one in five children in Canada and 40% of Indigenous children living off-reserve live in poverty. In Niagara, one in three people who use a food bank or the shelter system is a child.

Today, more children live in poverty in Canada than when the commitment was made in 1989. In Ontario there are half a million children growing up with fewer opportunities and in poorer health than their peers. Poverty rates among children whose families are new immigrants, racialized, Indigenous, led by female lone parents or impacted by disabilities are even more profoundly affected.

Since 1989, Ontario families have experienced social and economic upheaval that has degraded the quality and availability of services, jobs and income supports. Families have weathered free trade, globalization, stagnant wages and a growing trend towards precarious, part-time employment. On top of two major recessions, the manufacturing sector has declined from 18% of jobs in Ontario to just 11% and there has been a dramatic increase in lower-paid services-related jobs.

We often hear that getting a job, any job, is the antidote to poverty. We rarely hear that quality employment – living wage jobs, with regular hours, benefits and protections – are much harder to find, or that government policy plays a role in making sure that work pays.

More often, we hear the poor being blamed for their poverty and the refrain that now is not the right time for governments to invest in ending poverty. Case in point, in the late 1990s, funding for childcare, education, affordable housing and social assistance were cut back significantly. Today, funding for these services still falls well short of what is needed to lift Ontarians out of poverty, and restore their health and dignity.

The good news is that Ontario can fix child and family poverty by making poverty eradication a priority. And that commitment must be backed by persistent, strategic investments. Ending poverty is not only the right thing to do for our children, it's good for the economy and for our health. Currently, child poverty costs Ontario up to \$5.9 billion annually. The Canadian Medical Association has urged that governments must address poverty to improve the health of all Canadians.

While the current federal government has abandoned the notion of a national anti-poverty strategy, Ontario has shown some leadership through a provincial poverty reduction strategy. The province has made some modest gains. Starting in 2008, Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy resulted in minimum wage increases and investments in the Ontario Child Benefit, among other commitments. Child poverty rates declined by 9% until 2011 and over 40,000 children were lifted out of poverty. More than 60,000 were prevented from falling even deeper during the great recession.

But modest improvements are not enough. Families on provincial social assistance in Ontario are living in the deepest poverty and the time has long past to fix a system that has left hundreds of thousands without opportunity, dignity or hope for the future. And we need significant sustained investments in affordable housing and child care and policies to ensure livable wages.

As we look back to the commitment made in 1989, we should be inspired to move forward on this work and enhance social justice in Ontario. We cannot wait another twenty-five years for the commitment to be realized. Now is the time to act decisively and re-dedicate ourselves to ending child poverty in our lifetime.

The Niagara Poverty Reduction Network consists of 30+ organizations – health and social service agencies, boards of education, faith-based groups, the business community, regional government, and individuals who live in poverty – working collectively to reduce poverty in Niagara through information sharing, changing attitudes, and compelling Niagara citizens to take action. For more information on the NPRN, or to get involved, visit their website at www.wipeoutpoverty.ca

Campaign 2000 is a cross-Canada public education movement to build Canadian awareness and support for the 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. Campaign 2000 began in 1991 out of concern about the lack of government progress in addressing child poverty. Campaign 2000 is non-partisan in urging all Canadian elected officials to keep their promise to Canada's children.

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