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FAST FACTS

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Manitoba's poverty reduction plan All Aboard – Destination Unknown

On May 21st, the Manitoba government released *All Aboard: Manitoba's Poverty Reduction Strategy*. The 8-page glossy document outlines some solid “values and guiding principles” that provide a foundation for a plan, as well as a list of initiatives that the NDP government has introduced since first elected in 1999. The *All Aboard* announcement has been followed by a series of press releases intended to reinforce the idea that the government is serious about poverty reduction.

There is no doubt that the Doer government has taken important steps to address poverty over the past eight years. The *All Aboard* strategy outlines some of those initiatives and introduces some new programs. The Manitoba government is to be commended for actions they have taken. However, *All Aboard* falls seriously short as a comprehensive plan and their “strategy” will be meaningless without a clear destination and a map to get there.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Manitoba recently released *The view from here: Manitobans call for a poverty reduction plan*. Our plan, developed in collaboration with Make Poverty History Manitoba and others brings together several years of research and consultation with individuals and community organizations directly

involved with Manitoba's most vulnerable citizens. Over 70 organizations representing thousands of Manitobans have now endorsed *The view from here* and more continue to sign on. The report was downloaded more than 3100 times in the week following its release.

Our plan is comprehensive, and most importantly it outlines timelines and targets that, if implemented within the context of a legislated framework, would hold governments, present and future, accountable to ensuring that poverty is significantly reduced. But the Doer government has been consistently resistant to setting timelines and targets and they appear unlikely to pass supporting legislation.

It is perplexing to community-based organization that an NDP government has been so resistant to calls for a comprehensive poverty reduction plan, especially when other provincial governments have been much bolder. The PQ government in Quebec passed the *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* in 2002. The Conservative government in Newfoundland introduced *Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* - a plan developed in consultation with community organizations and complete with specific targets and timelines. Nova Scotia now has a plan and Ontario most recently



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MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
www.policyalternatives.ca

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passed *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* in December 2008. On May 6, 2009, the Ontario government's commitment was strengthened when all parties in the legislature voted unanimously to approve an amended *Bill 152: The Poverty Reduction Act, 2009*. Clearly there is political will in Canada to implement such plans.

However, in addition to resisting legislation, the Manitoba government is also cool to the idea of indicators. While they have outlined some potential indicators in *All Aboard* they do not attach them to any targets and timelines, only noting that these indicators "could" be used. They make no commitment to measuring poverty based on measures currently used by Statistics Canada. They simply note their goal is "to continuously reduce poverty and increase social inclusion".

Premier Doer points to insufficient indicators to measure poverty in First Nation communities as the reason not to set targets and timelines. While it is true that the traditionally used measure, the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) is not ideal, other measures can be used. Community-based organizations (CBOs) tend to use the LICO because this data is easily accessible. While not a perfect measure, it can still be used to give us some sense of where we are at and where we would like to be. But better measures are accessible to the Province through the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics (MBS) and the Manitoba government can also engage First Nations leaders and the MBS in the development of more appropriate indicators.

Anti-poverty legislation for Manitoba?

Anti-poverty legislation was initially proposed by community organizations in 2002. Proponents felt confident that the idea would be an easy sell since precedent had been set elsewhere. But they were told that such legislation was not likely. In 2007, the Liberals picked up on the idea and brought *Bill 204, the Social Inclusion and Anti-Poverty*

Act forward in 2008. This Bill outlined legislation very similar to that passed in Quebec. It went to second reading in the spring of 2009 and appears to have gained support from the Conservative caucus. But spring session has now ended without the Bill moving forward.

The NDP avoidance of Bill 204 is mystifying. While the Quebec experience tells us that legislation alone is not the answer, it is an important component of a comprehensive plan. The Doer government should move the Bill to committee for public debate and amendment where appropriate.

The All Aboard Plan is a good start, but if the NDP government believes that their 8-page plan will be accepted as a coherent strategy that will contribute to the broadly-based collaboration necessary to truly drive down poverty, they are mistaken. There are too many examples of Provincial governments that have done a much better job.

The Manitoba government is in an ideal position. The Liberal party has brought forward a Bill that seems compatible with the "values and guiding principles" of the NDP and the Conservatives are poised to support it. So what are we waiting for? Passing a law that would lead to a reduction in poverty in Manitoba combined with a comprehensive plan complete with timelines and targets, would not only ensure that the current government is held accountable for actions to address poverty, but more important, it would ensure that future governments are too.

Shauna MacKinnon is the Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba.

To support *The view from here* go to www.makepovertyhistory.ca



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