



February 12, 2009

## Manitobans are committed to poverty reduction. Is the Manitoba government?

**D**uring the 2008 federal election, federal parties and individual candidates refused to address two of the most important issues in this country: the growing inequalities in the distributions of income and wealth, and the growth in poverty.

The YWCA held political events across the country on September 28th “to highlight the need for a national [childcare] strategy, a solution to poverty and more affordable housing.” Candidates were invited to attend these events and contribute to the discussion. We don’t know what the response was in other major cities in Canada, but the Winnipeg Free Press reported that not a single candidate showed up at the YWCA event in Winnipeg.

The failure on the part of the parties to take part in this event no doubt reflected the fact that campaign strategists believed that the YWCA was out of touch with the concerns of Canadians. However, it was later confirmed by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) that it was the parties who were out of touch with the concerns of Canadians.

CCPA commissioned Environics Research to undertake a poll of Canadians to get a sense of how Canadians feel about poverty. The results of the survey showed that Canadians are very

concerned about persistent poverty and that they are far out in front of our politicians on the poverty issue. The survey shows that the views of Manitobans are the same as other Canadians.

- 87% agree that if other countries like the U.K. and Sweden can reduce poverty, so can Canada.
- 86% believe that if governments take concrete action, poverty in Canada can be greatly reduced.
- 86% say both the Prime Minister and the provincial Premiers need to set real targets and timelines to reduce poverty.
- 87% said they would be proud if their Premier took the lead on poverty reduction.
- 86% say that Canada should try to distinguish itself in the world as a country where no one lives in poverty.
- 80% of Manitobans call on provincial governments to bring in a concrete strategy to reduce poverty at least 25% over the next five years.

When asked what we should do about this issue in the event of a recession a significant majority of Manitobans - 71% - say that “in a recession, it is more important than ever to make helping poor Canadians a priority.” As for the sorts of actions that would be most effective in reducing poverty: 90% call for an increase in the



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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minimum wage to raise workers above the poverty line; 79% recommend better income support to help poor families with the costs of raising kids; 85% support the creation of more low-cost day care spaces and 92% want more affordable housing; 96% endorse greater investment in job and skill training for individuals who are between jobs; and 77% want welfare rates tied to the cost of living.

So, it appears that the Canadian public is fed up with both the persistent and pervasive increases in inequalities in the distribution of income in recent decades. They also disagree with government's and business elites' apparent acceptance of high rates of entrenched poverty. In sum, Canadians, including Manitobans, want inspired leadership in addressing these issues.

### **Manitoba Budget Consultations**

Manitoba's finance minister has been on the road seeking budget ideas from the public. Many of the initiatives endorsed by respondents to the CCPA survey have been presented to the Minister in previous exercises. Given the current economic climate in Canada and the acknowledgement by economists that investment is needed to stimulate the economy, the Manitoba government can lead the way for Canada on the poverty issue and do the things they have the power to do, including:

- Forging ahead with significant improvements in social assistance rates and pegging future adjustments to the rate of inflation; and accelerating increases in the minimum wage. Every additional dollar in the pockets of low-income households goes directly back into the local economy.
- Increasing investments in social housing by committing to the Right to Housing Coalition target of a minimum 300 units per year for 5 years while also leading advocacy efforts seeking a national housing strategy that would allow

us to meet the real need for 1000 new units annually. The Manitoba Government has taken an important first step by announcing significant investments in rehabilitation of the public stock that will meet an important social need while also stimulating the economy.

- Expediting the implementation of Family Choices: Manitoba's Five-Year Agenda for Childcare and Early Learning. Since this program was announced in April 2008 progress has been very slow. The 07/08 budget was under spent by \$10.6 million even though persistent problems in the childcare system remain. In addition to providing support for children, investing in childcare is good for the economy as it allows women to participate in the labour force and it creates jobs.
- Increasing access to education and training for excluded groups by extending income supports for social assistance recipients who wish to pursue education beyond the current two-year limit and establishing a scholarship program designed to encourage high-risk youth to complete their secondary education.

These are just a few of the initiatives that could be implemented by the Manitoba government to help strengthen the Manitoba economy in the face of the current recession in Canada, and, over the longer term, enhance the productivity of marginalized individuals and families. Moreover, the evidence strongly suggests that these and other measures to address poverty and inequality would be welcomed by a large majority of Manitobans.

CCPA Manitoba, in collaboration with Make Poverty History Manitoba, will release a comprehensive poverty reduction plan soon.

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