

Foundations of Three Canadian Campaigns against Poverty Amid Affluence

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Overview

Diverging trends shape poverty amid affluence in Canada of the turn of the century. There are new national laws and provincial policies that systemically decrease the entitlement of Canadians to welfare and social services while free trade agreements and reductions in income tax and employment standards increase the mobility of capital, trade and labor. Diversity in employment, family, cultural arrangements emerge at the same time there is heightened surveillance of those claiming welfare and services. Professionals and volunteers in agencies are expected to expand their responsiveness to more complex demands of claimants while facing the constraints of short term contracts and narrow performance indicators.

This paper begins with a portrait of poverty amid affluence in Canada followed by an excursion into the trends in the philosophical and research literature on foundations for anti-poverty and social justice campaigns faced with these opposing trends and the paradox of growing poverty and wealth. The heart of the paper is a description and analysis of three different types of Canadian anti-poverty campaigns: a full community fight to shut down a welfare snitch line in 1996; the provincial movement in British Columbia against the two year limits on welfare legislated in 2002; and the national campaign to end child poverty by the 21st century. The campaigns varied in scope and impact, but each searched for pragmatic and philosophical foundations to guide strategies that both recognized and moved against the paradox of growing inequality. Three sets of common foundational narratives are proposed.

Each foundational narrative instructs participants, allies and audiences of a campaigns about who are the key actors or agents and what actions are they expected to carry out. These narratives are sketched in opposition or counter to accepted and hegemonic narratives. One set of foundational narratives claims elected government officials as well as all citizens are responsible to abolish arbitrary injustices, while states are responsible to assist the most vulnerable citizens and invest in children as citizens of the future. Another set of narratives speaks to the responsibility of citizens and their civil organizations as well as state agencies to seek a better society than compares favorably with universal human standards. The last narratives embedded in the organization and strategies of the campaigns stated that groups, organizations, coalitions and individuals associated with an anti-poverty campaign determine voluntarily and democratically their activities and messages that may vary depending on the audience of their

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choice. The paper ends by exploring what the limits and concerns with these three sets of foundational anti-poverty narratives, and what opposition and backlash are expected.

Canadian Poverty, Canadian Affluence

The poor have been with Canada for a long time. At the beginning of the 20th century the majority of white Canadians and virtually all aboriginal peoples and visible minorities lived out short lives with minimal income, insecure jobs, and primitive health care (Copps, 1974). In the Depression of the 1930s one in four white men could not find jobs while women lost their professional jobs as teachers or secretaries upon marriage well into the 1960s. Throughout much of the century aboriginal families lived on poor reserves while their children were forced to attend authoritarian residential schools far away from home.

By the end of 20th century the situation improved steadily for most Canadians. The United Nations Development Programme ranks countries on the Human Development Index (HDI). This is a composite measure of achievements on dimensions of life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate and school enrollment, and per capital purchasing power. From 1975 to 2002 Canada improved each year, from .869 to .939 out of a perfect 1.0 score. Canada consistently ranked among the top five countries along with Australia, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands (UNDP, 2004, p.143). Economic growth, GDP, employment, and other indicators favored by business groups and economists also point to a healthy, robust, prosperous country. Progress is even reported on substantial reductions in government debts and deficits, with the province of Alberta claiming to be the first debt free province in Canada.

Despite these measures of progress, poverty has not disappeared in Canada. It has been rediscovered repeatedly in the three decades by the Canadian Senate Committee Report on Poverty, Royal Commissions on the Status of Women, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Parliamentary Special Sub-Committees, and National Council on Welfare. Even the United Nations reported that Canada slipped to 14th place in 2000 among the OECD and Eastern European countries on the Human Poverty Index as 12.8% of its population had incomes 50% below median incomes .¹

There have been fluctuations in poverty rates over the past 20 years, but with the exception of a significant decrease in the poverty rate among seniors, Canadian poverty rates appear stable and consistent. The National Council of Welfare found the Canadian poverty rate was 16% in 1980 and twenty years later² using the respected independent estimate of low income calculated by Statistics Canada on census data.³ So too, 15.8% of children under the age of 18 lived in low income families in 1980; in 1999, 15.6% did so. One in two single mothers (57%) were poor in 1980; the same large proportion remained poor (52%) in 1999.

If one uses after-tax rates to calculate poverty, the rates are lower: 14% in 1996, dropping to 9.3% in 2001.⁴ The higher rates based on pre-tax incomes are used more often by poverty groups are produced by calculations while the lower rates after-tax rates based are those usually quoted by business and government groups..⁵ There are other approaches to estimating poverty, such as the United Nations' poverty rate for Canada of 12.8%--calculated by counting people with incomes 50% below median income.⁶ Whatever rate is used, that of 9.5%, 12.8% or 16% for the year 2000, the Canadian poverty rate is two to three times higher than those of Western Europe. All three rates mean that **nearly five million Canadians live on poor, near poor and insecure incomes at the turn of the 21st century in the midst of a wealthy, beautiful country replete with water, land, resources, and a small population of 30 million (30,007,090 in 2001).** This critical mass of poor and near poor people encounter difficulties finding adequate housing, eating nutritiously, responding to emergencies, and participating actively in educational and community activities. As one low income mother in a Canadian research on child poverty so aptly concluded: "At the end of the month there is never enough. I always owe. Always in debt. And worst of all, I cannot give to others." (Child Poverty Research Group, 1988).

In addition, there is disturbing evidence that the depth and impact of poverty are getting worse. There is a precipitous drop in the rate of unemployed persons who are eligible to receive federal insurance that they paid into while employed. In 1990 74% of unemployed persons received insurance benefits, but by 2001 only 39% did so. The number of Canadians claiming welfare or social security income assistance has also dropped significantly from a high of 3,000,000 in 1995 to 1,745,600 in 2003. In 1996, the *Canadian Assistance Plan* was abolished. This federal law had established incentives, funding, and principles for services to persons in need. It was not replaced; instead the federal government may use annual budget legislation to transfer money for social, education and health services with virtually no guidelines, incentives or principles concerning responsibilities to persons in need, unless they are medically ill. Since 1996, almost all provinces have passed new welfare legislation to reduce eligibility and benefits and to introduce mandatory workfare and more surveillance for fraud and job searches. Welfare benefits calculated in constant dollars have decreased by 20 to 40% in nearly all provinces from 1986 to 2003 for single employables and families while the costs of housing, food and transportation has increased. Thus, in 1986 you could claim \$8,032 if single and employable; in 2003, the total amount had dropped to \$6,623. Similarly, in British Columbia, annual benefits for a four member household in 1986 was \$16,679 dropping steeply to \$12,556 in 2003 (National Council of Welfare 2004).

In the last ten years Canadian cities report significant increases in the

number of people living in shelters and on the streets, even if employed. Agencies report more children, families and employed people must regularly go to food banks. There are more deaths of people living on the street. The United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development conclude that Toronto has gone into "decline" since 1990, especially for its low income citizens. The income gap between the poor and wealthy is growing (Yalinizyan, 2000) as are the number of neighbourhoods in which more than one-third live in poverty (see also Lee, 2000; Hajnal 1995). Even the more conservative group of politicians and bureaucrats that make up the Federation of Canadian Municipalities argue there is a growing income gap between groups of Canadians in a recent report despite sustained economic growth in Canada. Furthermore, the introduction of user fees for social, education, and recreational services, increase in transportation and housing costs, and stricter eligibility requirements for access to services restrict the capacity of individuals and families on low income from participating in community life as active citizens.

In brief, it is a "bad time to be poor" concludes the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in a report on the situation in British Columbia (Klein & Long, 2003). Anti-poverty activists argue that "bashing the poor" (Swanson, 2001) and excluding "disorderly people" (Hermer & Moserh, 2002) are now acceptable public politics, fostering punitive laws and regulations. Researchers who followed 41 families in Ontario for three years and statistical trends conclude that Canada's largest province may be booming for some people, but not for others. In 2000, Beznanson & McMurray conclude: "Instead of being better off, many households in Ontario are struggling to get by because of fewer job protections, less generous social programs and cuts to social spending." (2000,p. 2)

There are some exceptions to these trends towards more inequality and deeper poverty. For example, benefits for persons with disabilities have not dropped significantly, while the income of seniors who live in two person households has definitely improved. (But most seniors live in one person households; their income has improved since 1970, but 20% still live on low incomes in 2000.) So too Statistics Canada reports that some aspects of inequality among families is decreasing. In the national Child Tax Benefit Program for example, low income families receive far more child benefits in 2001 through the tax system than do high income families while in 1980 high and low income families had received nearly equal levels of child benefits.⁷

Anti-Poverty Campaigns

In brief, there is a stable and significant level of poverty in Canada, and signs that inequality and deepening poverty are increasing. It is not surprising therefore that there have been various movements and organizations emerging in the last 15 years to oppose these trends including: Canada's contribution to World's March of Women against Violence and Poverty, the Metro Network for Social Justice (Conway 2004), End Legislated Poverty in British Columbia, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (Carroll, 1999; Swanson, 2001) and a unique solidarity campaign in Quebec that has sponsored an anti-poverty law.

The purpose of this paper is to enunciate the foundational ideas of several Canadian anti-poverty campaigns. To ensure rich information for analytical purposes, I selected three campaigns that are focus specifically on poverty and welfare issues that vary in scope, complexity, and tactics. One campaign is national, the second is provincial, and the third is local. I have also picked campaigns that are full of ordinary people. There were no charismatic leaders in these initiatives, nor could I identify clearly any leaders, although in each there were a few people who contributed much time and expertise. None of the campaigns started as a campaign nor did they begin with budgets or organizations. Another reason for selecting these three campaigns is that they were modestly successful according to the participants and policy-makers, despite the absence of substantial funds, leaders, or organization. Finally, I have both insider and outsider knowledge of these campaigns. I participated to some degree in each providing active leadership on particular strategies and activities. Most of the time I observed and wrote for academic and popular press (e.g. Reitsma, Street and Keck, 1996; Reitsma, Street & Wallace, 2004).

This paper is informed by the practice of praxis. That is, the search to understand and change poverty by simultaneously engaging in action, reflecting on those ideas that emerge from actions, and constructing ideas to inform action. To help make sense of foundational ideas of the three campaigns I have drawn upon the work of critical justice theorists such as David Harvey, Bill Carroll, Pierre Bourdieu and Jurgen Habermas, as well as the feminist, decolonizing, and difference-centred writings of Bettina Apetheker, Chandra Mohanty and Chela Sandoval. But, for today I concentrate on the immanence of the struggles, particularly the ideas developed in anti-poverty campaigns. What are the narratives that emerge from people who simultaneously engage in action and reflection and more action?

The description of the campaigns sketches briefly the development of relationships, identity, or the strategies. Each required many people taking time, careful thought, enormous energy and resources to launch initiatives, to maintain healthy relationships with each other over long periods of time, and to combat the inevitable counterattacks, backlash, and hurts associated with oppositional work. But, analytically and philosophically the key question is: on what “kind of idea” do we chose to spend that energy and resources, as Walby asks (2001) in her analysis of coalitions seeking equality in an era of globalization. What other kinds of ideas could we, or should we select to guide a particular campaign or justice movement? Thus, the particular focus in this paper is on the kind of ‘subversive ideas’ using Susan George’s term used by the three Canadian campaigns, and what do these ideas “do” and not do. What imaginings and opportunities were opened by the ideas and which strategies did those ideas close or ignore.

My particular approach to analyzing foundational ideas is a search for narratives, sometimes called key stories or “master frames” (Carroll, 1999), that resist and oppose those messages and ideas that are dominant and made into self-evident truths. Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Acts of Resistance* states how it can take years of “symbolic drip feed” for “something false to become self-evident and seen to be true” (1998, p. 31). He argues that the work of scientists, activists, organizations, citizens is to speak the truth and oppose the false self-evident assumptions that growth for example and productivity, competitiveness, and low taxes are the desired goals of human actions. Bill Carroll, a Canadian sociologist, examines the master narratives used by social movements and transnational companies to explain, rationalize and plan their goals and strategies that counter the hegemonic or dominant framing of reality (Carroll & Ratner, 1994).

I too analyze the counter narratives that oppose the self-evident stories about poverty and inequality. This means an analysis of who are key actors in a situation, what are the conflicts they encounter, and what approaches are taken to try and resolve the conflicts. These narratives or stories that counter the dominant ones are created by people as a way to make sense of the world they live in and a way to imagine the contours of the world they wish to live in. What then are the narratives about who should and could do something to reduce poverty and why. After summarizing each campaign, I will present three sets of narratives that are common to the campaigns. For each narrative I look at: (1) which actors are responsible; (2) what the actors are expected to do; and (3) what self-evident or dominant narratives are they opposing. I will end with some points about the limits of the narratives and backlash that can be expected. I look forward to hearing other papers and discussions throughout this conference to further an understanding of the possibilities and limits of various

narratives in our work to oppose poverty amid affluence in Canada and elsewhere.

The National Campaign 2000 to End Child poverty in Canada

This is a national social movement that aims to build awareness and support for programs and policies to end child poverty in Canada. It is a non-partisan coalition that began informally in the mid 1980s and continues to this day. Its first substantial accomplishment was the crafting and engagement of many politicians. Leaders of all parties agreed to submit an all-party resolution to the Canadian federal House of Commons stating that: "This house seeks to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000." On November 24, 1989 this resolution was passed unanimously.

Since 1989 Campaign 2000 has worked to secure full implementation of that resolution. Today, in 2004, 85 national, community and provincial partners from faith, service, union, women, immigrant, and all segments of the not-for-profit organizations are actively involved in the ongoing campaign. Hundreds of additional groups are associated with the work of producing and disseminating regular national, provincial and local report cards. Campaign 2000 participants prepare research reports, press conferences, website updates and engage in public education activities and regular meetings, lobbying and correspondence with politicians of all political parties in their work to end child poverty (see its website www.campaign2000.ca)

The material and activities of Campaign 2000 members are bi-directional. One direction is to instruct the public and officials to truly see the situation of high poverty rates among children and its impact, and to inspire moral obligations to end child poverty. The other direction points the public and decision-makers to the future, and what solutions are required to end poverty and redress its negative impacts. The solutions have been consistently framed as "social investment in children." In the earlier years the specific components of the investment was to call for a comprehensive child benefits paid to families, comprehensive childcare and early development initiatives, and youth education endowments. In later years, more structural solutions have been added including affordable housing strategy and creation of good jobs with living wages and decent working conditions.

What is the impact of Campaign 2000? Child poverty has not ended in the year 2000. To the contrary: child poverty rates in Canada are exactly the same now as they were when the campaign began. They still are 15% - nearly one million children live in families with low or insecure incomes. Campaign 2000 should have had a big party in the year 2000, and then dissolved itself. Instead, the 85 partners carry on, producing a

report card in 2001, in 2002, and again in 2003. Each states the bad news, and some good news, and repeats a plea to invest in children with specific initiatives. But Campaign 2000 can boast significant accomplishments. Most significant is the original 1989 all-party resolution passed in the federal House of Commons: it continues to provide a moral and political beacon for what should and could be possible in wealthy Canada. Furthermore, child poverty is now accepted as a fact, in most Canadian sectors: after 15 years of drip feeding reports and facts, the public and politicians reluctantly agree that there is child poverty in this rich country. Furthermore, reduction of child poverty and its impact is clearly on the agenda of national, provincial and local leaders, with action plans proliferating. In addition, substantial programs and funding have been directed to early childhood education, especially for high risk children.

The most significant change is the implementation of the National Child Benefit in 1998, the first new national social program in 30 years. The Child Benefit is almost universal, reaching 90% of Canadian families and replaces older targeted programs that gave lower benefits. The Child Benefit had been developed by provincial governments and First Nations communities in collaboration with the federal bureaucrats and politicians to craft this program. It is delivered and progressively clawed back through the tax system. In July 2003 \$1,169 (or \$1,401 if child under 7 years) was paid to a family for every child if the family income was less than \$33,487; the amount is reduced as family income increases and no benefits are given for families with incomes over \$80,000. Low income families who earn income through employment, but earn less than \$33,000, may also apply for a full or partial supplement of an additional \$1,463 paid monthly. Only "working families," not families on welfare may apply for the supplement. The goal of the Child Benefit program is to invest in children and to give incentives to low income families with adults employed by the market. Federal funding for child benefits has increased significantly when comparing 1989 and 2004 figures.

I cannot argue Campaign 2000 was responsible for the development and funding of the National Child Benefit. I will argue, however, that without its research, educational activities, and continuous pressure, a policy directly geared to child benefits would not have become a priority. Without Campaign 2000 to End Child Poverty in Canada, and without the National Child Benefit, child poverty would have increased rather than remained the same.

The Provincial Campaign to Abolish Two Year Limits on Welfare in British Columbia

Following is the story of a two year, partially successful campaign against arbitrary limits on receipt of welfare in the province of in the western province of British Columbia with population of nearly 4 million (3,907,735 in 2001 census).

The *Employment and Assistance Act* and its companion the *Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities* were passed in June 2002 by the new Liberal government that held 77 out of 79 seats in the legislature. Eligibility, benefits, and access to advocacy and appeals were significantly reduced. Documented proof of being “truly in need” increased for welfare claimants as did surveillance of assets and penalties for inaccurate reporting or non compliance with employment plans. Total benefits were cut by as much as 40% per month, including a 100% claw back of all employment earnings and child support, unless deemed disabled. Parents whose youngest child was three years old were re-categorized as ‘temporary assistance’ cases and needed to seek employment. Post-secondary students were no longer eligible to apply for welfare unless disabled but able to attend full-time studies. Offices and services were closed in dozens of communities. The Income Assistance Advisory Board was abolished and the right to appeal denial or reduction of benefits limited. Other policies and program changes meant most advocacy groups, women’s centres, housing registries, and community law clinics that offer services to those on low income had their provincial funding reduced in 2002, and eliminated by 2004. Legal aid was virtually unavailable for poverty law or tenant complaints as of January 2002.

The most drastic and qualitatively different changes in B.C.’s welfare new law and regulations were four types of time limits.⁸ First, there is the “*three week wait*” for welfare after making an official application during which claimants must continue to seek employment including those caring for children,. Second there is the “*two-year independence test*” meaning applicants, usually youth, must demonstrate they have worked for 840 hours or earned at least \$7,000 in each of two consecutive years before applying, unless disabled, fleeing abuse or caring for children. Third, there is the “*two years out of five*” eligibility for welfare. Employable persons are to be cut off all assistance after two years of assistance, unless exemptions are permitted by officials, while employable parents who have claimed benefits for 24 months and whose youngest is older than three years are to have monthly benefits reduced by at least \$100. Finally, there is the *lifetime ban on access to welfare for those convicted of welfare fraud*. Unique to British Columbia, however, is its two year limit to benefits. It is this time limit that became the concentrated focus of public debate and resistance.

Dissent against the various regressive and problematic provisions of the new bills began immediately. Social justice, faith, unions, and some professional and academic groups registered their opposition in the mainstream and alternative media, and provided the two opposition legislative members (out of 79 elected members) with critiques of key provisions for legislative debates.⁹ Although all the provisions came into effect in September 2002, the two year time limit, named “the ticking welfare clock” by

its opponents, started retroactively as of April 1, 2002.

There were numerous sessions organized by established social justice groups and new coalitions to analyze the provisions and build oppositional connections across the provinces during 2002 and 2003. Local and provincial research projects were initiated to monitor how the policy changes and funding cuts, including those to welfare, were affecting people and communities. Results were systemically distributed using internet and personal links.¹⁰ Some of the opposition was dramatic and personal, when for instance the Ministry of Attorney General fired the entire Legal Services Society Board in February 2002 for refusing to implement the elimination of legal aid for poverty law. Conversely, Law Society of BC passed proposed a motion to censure the Ministry of Attorney General. A similar motion of censure was passed in May 2002 by the B.C. Association of Social Workers against the Minister of Human Resources, a former social worker.

One emphasis of the protests during the fall of 2002 and subsequent spring was opposition to the process initiated by the Ministry of Human Resources to re-assess the eligibility of claims of 62,000 persons with living with disabilities. Disability benefits accounts for one-third of the Ministry's budget; those eligible receive modestly higher monthly benefits than regular claimants. The Ministry had been instructed by the larger Liberal government agenda to cut costs. The massive re-assessment exercise was costly, difficult, and systematically opposed by 400 disability groups across the province. It also was ineffective: in 2002 there were 56,254 persons with disabilities eligible; two years later there were more--62,808 clients in Jan 2004. The Office of the Auditor General examined the conduct of the review finding only 46 cases were actually closed. Of the \$5 million needed to pay for the review, 60% was used to pay assessors and doctors to complete the full eligibility documentation required by the government.¹¹

A subtle aspect of opposition to the laws and their limits was a surge in innovative approaches to "stop the clock ticking" by exempting people from the welfare time limits through for example registration in short-term training courses. Most significant was the re-classification of many persons into the new administrative category of "persons with persistent and multiple barriers" or PPMB including serious but not permanent health limitations or unemployability due to effects of relationship abuse. There were no persons classified as such in 2002; two years later, 14,733 clients had a PPMB designation, meaning they were temporarily excused from time limits and eligible for limited training benefits.

Opposition to the new laws intensified by the fall of 2003, with a focus on the time limits effective April 1, 2004. Estimate of persons facing the cut-offs ranged from 14,000 to 27,000, without appeal, recourse, or alternatives.¹² There were several significant

features of the efforts of the opposition.

First, organizations, large and small, concentrated on lobbying the provincial government, and their individual MLAs to rescind or abolish the two year rule. This singular abolitionist focus minimized prolonged debates on non-competing alternatives, such as longer, but still arbitrary limits of three or five years.¹³

Second, the opposition included formal, public challenges and official motions passed by Boards of Directors and elected officials. There was for instance the constitutional challenge to the two-year time limit on eligibility for social assistance on the grounds launched Oct 20, 2003 by the Poverty and Human Rights Project in Vancouver, the British Columbia Public Interest Advocacy Centre and various community groups¹⁴ on the basis that it violates basic human rights in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in international treaties that Canada has ratified. It was the motion approved by the City of Vancouver, however, that galvanized a whole new level of protest. A group of elected reform councillors passed a motion November 6, 2003 that stated the City would “actively and immediately lobby the province to rescind the law imposing welfare time, and provide Vancouver community groups with regular updates on their efforts limits.”¹⁵ In addition, the councillors approved a motion to “send a letter to other municipal councils in BC outlining its concerns and urging that other councils lobby the province to stop welfare time limits.” Rapid electronic distribution of this approved motion throughout the activist community and official letters sent by Vancouver city staff to officials in every municipality across the province prompted other cities, including those of the City of Victoria and the 14 municipalities represented by the Capital Regional District to pass similar motions. Governing bodies of professional groups such as the Deans and Directors of Canadian Schools of Social Work, the B.C. Association of Social Work, and various school boards approved similar motions to rescind the time limits, as did social planning councils, housing societies, faith groups, and voluntary agencies.

The third feature of the campaign was the remarkable absence of coordinated strategies or attempts to organize coalitions, with the exception of the singular focus on rescinding the two year limit. Instead, journalists reported there were “many levels protest[ing] impending welfare cut-off” and not just anti-poverty groups.¹⁶ People and groups used diverse tactics and relevant arguments to register their protest of the time limits grounded in their own experiences and knowledge. Solidarity Coalitions in Victoria and Prince George for example used rallies and put posters with pictures of the ticking welfare clock on telephone polls to reach their audience. A group of 62 academics associated with the University of Victoria used research arguments about the ineffectiveness and illegality of time limits in their protest letter to the premier and Minister of Human Resources. The City of Vancouver argued the province had

promised to minimize negative impacts of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games on low income people. Elected councils across the province were concerned about the impact of hundreds, maybe thousands of persons being cut off, downloading responsibility for their survival on the cities and towns. By way of contrast, Diocesan Council of the Anglican Church, in a letter sent to 60 Anglican churches for debate and decision, reasoned the welfare limits had to be rescinded because of the “profoundly moral” nature of income assistance policies and that the true character of a society is measured “by the ways we support, encourage and care for the least fortunate”¹⁷ Similar letters were read from pulpits in the United Church, while multifaith action groups urged individuals and groups to write letters to the premier and Minister of Human Resources requesting the limits be abolished on compassionate grounds. Others joined the 12 hour multifaith vigil on the Legislature steps on February 25th followed by a night sleeping on the streets.¹⁸ Throughout December and January of 2004, the City of Victoria, the Capital Regional District, other municipalities, social planning councils, school boards, and large and small voluntary organization used different arguments and local evidence to pass motions to rescind the limits on welfare.

Lastly, there was sustained visible and invisible linking undertaken by many people and groups, especially during the months of November 2003 to February 2004. The intent was to spread information about the law and the welfare limits. The aim was also to initiate strategies about how policy could be interpreted and messages represented. This linking and taking the initiative are related, but not the same as coordinating activities or coalition building, of which there was little in the campaign. The internet was used to spread factual information immediately after a motion was passed, or when an informative analysis or argument was made. Activists, academics, faith groups, and concerned citizens used personal emails, telephone and small group meetings to debate and select strategies, and to practice them. For instance, there was significant behind the scenes work to coach participants of a January 30, 2004 Victoria press conference that attracted all local print, radio and T.V. media, and national coverage. This press conference was timed to put pressure on the Minister of Human Resources to respond as promised by the end of January to requests for specific information on how many people would be affected by the time limits.

Did the campaign work? Yes and no. This linked, diverse, multi level, uncoordinated but singularly focused campaign to abolish the arbitrary two year limits on welfare did capture a measure of positive, albeit fleeting public support. It was the government who had to defend the limits and only a few allies came forward to defend publicly the limits.¹⁹ The arbitrariness and inhumanity of the two year limit captured the public’s compassion and imagination. No one knew who would be cut off, nor what would happen to the anticipated hundreds or thousands who could be “on the streets” without recourse or appeal. Supporters of the campaign to rescind were helped by a real worry that no one claimed responsibility for those cut-off welfare. Others were

annoyed with the unwillingness of provincial politicians to give information about the impact of the cuts on those most affected—the claimants and their communities.

The time limits, however, have not been abolished. Neither the law nor the regulations on time limits have changed. Yet, there is a significant public policy clarification on exemptions. In 2002 and 2003 the Ministry noted 18 or 20 exemptions to the cut-offs.²⁰ Just five weeks before the April 1, 2004 deadline when many expected thousands of recipients who had received benefits for two years to be cut-off totally and on the streets, a new exemption was announced on February 6th. This new exemption stated that “people who have an employment plan, are complying with their plan, are actively looking for work, and have not been successful in finding employment”²¹ could continue to collect benefits. The Ministry argued this exemption was not new, but a clarification of existing policy and thus there had been no cause for alarm. Opponents of the welfare limits, however, claimed a small victory as all the exemptions, especially the 25th one, included virtually all persons who are eligible for welfare. Even the mainstream media stated in front-page news items on February 7, 2004 that the “province backs off plan for dramatic cuts to welfare.”²²

Although significant, the victory is small. The public and government debates continue to focus on the importance of employment, not its adequacy or its relevance to a person’s situation. Parenting and care-giving for the sick are not considered work. Without minimal support and maximum surveillance, it will be simple to cut people off welfare for not complying with what the Ministry calls the ‘legally binding employment plan.’ In addition, the welfare rates are even more inadequate than before the 2002 cuts pushing people further into debt every month after paying for food and shelter.²³

Most important, far more people are denied assistance, than cut off. With the new laws it is increasingly difficult to become eligible for welfare because of the three week wait, the two year independence tests, the assets tests, and the higher expectations for documented proof of eligibility. In 2002, 214,516 persons were eligible for assistance, already a significant decrease from a high of 371,427 in 1995, the year before the *Canada Assistance Plan* was abolished and the new *B.C. Benefits* law was proclaimed. Nine years later, only 166, 479 persons were eligible to claim benefits in January 2004 even though unemployment rates, especially for youth or those with less than university education have not decreased in B.C. while costs of living have increased. The B.C. Ministry of Human Resources continues to argue for a policy narrative that instructs citizens to believe that regardless of access to adequate employment, childcare, or training, “a job is better than welfare and that people who are able to work should work.”²⁴ To enforce this narrative, punitive measures such as time limits—with exemptions—are required to lead Canada in “a fundamental shift in the culture surrounding income assistance from one of entitlement to one with a renewed

sense of personal responsibility”.²⁵

Abolition of a Welfare Snitch Line in Northern Ontario

The next and final story is about a local campaign that ended successfully after 18 months. Welfare snitch lines, also called fraud hotlines or social assistance investigation lines, are dedicated telephone lines introduced to encourage citizens to report cases of suspected welfare fraud to the authorities. The telephone number is widely advertised and featured in phone books. Information may be reported anonymously, and welfare officials follow up the tips.

The District Social Services Administration Board launched a welfare snitch line in January 1994 in a northern Ontario city of 162,000 people, many of them francophone and aboriginal. This line was one component of various new initiatives against welfare fraud and verification of welfare eligibility that the province encouraged and funded. The intent of the snitch line was to target opportunists and save millions of dollars. The introduction of the snitch line was given a high profile in the local media through most of the year. Bi-monthly advertisements in local newspapers invited citizens to call and report cases of suspected fraud. “Callers flood welfare snitch line on first day” was the headline in a local newspaper. Other articles featured the names and addresses of those charged with welfare fraud, mostly women. For several weeks one radio and a TV station started their news shows with welfare fraud allegations and provided updates based on regular press releases from the police.

Initially, the opposition to the snitch line was muted. A coalition of welfare recipients, social justice advocates and artists formed in the spring, called the Bleeding Hearts Coalition. Media reported their activities, especially the protests and street popular theatre about the myths of welfare fraud. Investigative journalists dug into the difficulties of people falsely accused of fraud, while one community newspaper publicly declared it would no longer print names of those charged with welfare fraud until convictions confirmed.

Later that year action heated up following two events: the release of a major local report on child poverty in the region completed by coalition of established health, welfare, school and social service representatives, and election of new councillors to the local government. Some councillors were avid supporters of the snitch line; others opposed it. A small ad hoc group of people with connections to the aboriginal, legal, and social service communities and who were committed to abolishing the snitch line started

to meet regularly early in 1995.

Four oppositional strategies were pursued in the campaign. First a conjuncture was created—that is a opportune moment during which a potential decision could be made, but the outcome was uncertain and desired options were significantly contested by various groups. The anniversary of the snitch line's installation was chosen for a public review. Second, members of the ad hoc group, their friends and colleagues asked their communities to send letters, make calls, prepare briefs, and pass motions in their organizations stating their opposition to the snitch line and requesting the Welfare Board hold a review. Third, arguments and evidence were developed opposing the snitch line that appealed to different decision-makers including: it was inefficient, cost money, falsely accused people, and destroyed community trust that had taken years to build in the aboriginal, francophone, and neighbourhoods who lived on low incomes and claimed assistance from local authorities. Finally, once the Welfare Board reluctantly agreed to hold a review, a new flurry of letters, arguments, and visits were prepared including a report that the cause of rising social service costs was not related to welfare fraud. There was another round of articles, letters and debates for and against the line in the print and visual media, including a TV poll that indicated the majority who called in supported the snitch line. In March, the Welfare Board approved a motion, with a narrow majority that authorized the staff to discontinue the investigation line. For once there was a success and a party. As a coda, however, I reluctantly add that the small success of this local campaign was dwarfed by the subsequent decisions of the provincial government to slash welfare benefits by 21% and to reduce eligibility criteria making students and mothers of children older than six years ineligible. The provincial government also instituted a provincial snitch line with a toll-free number.

Foundational Narratives in the Campaigns

Three sets of narratives guide the actions of lead actors in the campaigns summarized in Table 1. In brief, the narratives are: abolish injustice while helping the vulnerable; seek a better society based on universal human standards; and promote voluntary participation that encourages diverse tactics appropriate to different audiences. The first set is the most provocative in rhetoric radical in intent. The narrative is this: our politicians can, should and will abolish injustices and inhumane practices. This narrative states the conflict in the situation is about injustice: there is injustice and it is wrong. Child poverty is wrong; the two year limits on welfare is unjust; the welfare snitch line is inhumane. The actors must search for resolutions that abolish the injustice: end child poverty by a certain date; repeal the welfare limits; discontinue the snitch line. This abolitionist instruction is different that narratives such as reducing poverty, extending welfare limits to three or five years, or modifying the snitch line. The

other anti-poverty story line is the state and government actors are to help vulnerable persons and invest in citizens. Children living in low income need child care, early development programs and financial help; persons with limited income are entitled to income assistance while in need and should not be harassed by neighbours reporting on them.

Table 1. Anti-Poverty Narratives and Counter Narratives in Three Canadian Campaigns

Anti-Poverty Narratives	<i>Counter Narratives</i>
<p>The public & elected politicians.... will abolish injustices</p> <p>The state organizations and representatives.... will assist vulnerable persons and invest in citizens</p>	<p><i>Individuals are responsible for their history & situation while unproductive, dependent recipients need to be monitored and may be helped temporarily</i></p>
<p>The public... seeks a better society</p> <p>The public, states, and social services... must compare their well-being to universal standards</p>	<p><i>There is no alternative, or alternatives are too expensive, and Canadians are much better off than most other countries</i></p>
<p>Individuals, groups and organizations determine voluntarily their participation in campaigns</p> <p>Individuals, groups and organizations.... vary arguments and strategies for different audiences.</p>	<p><i>There needs to be a coordinated central organization with strategic plans and clear hierarchy of authority to make decisions.</i></p>

Even though politicians and state representatives are among the “bad guys” who create poverty and inequality, nonetheless, in this first set of narratives, elected officials, members of parliament, mayors, councillors, and civil servants are expected to take the roles of leading actors and actresses. It is they who are responsible to the people to change the situation. International decision-makers are also included as supporting political actors, such as those in the United Nations who monitor the progress of countries who have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The messages in all the campaigns was that governments have been elected and are legitimate, significant characters that can and should take action to end poverty and arbitrary limits to assistance.

This first set of narratives is contrary to dominant ones that erase the collective deprivations of racism, sexism, and class from the context and the specific particularities of an individual’s situation. The dominant story is that individuals can and should be responsible for themselves and their children, working in whatever jobs they can and asking family members and neighbours to help mind the children. If a person or head of household cannot pay their bills, they must prove with documents why they should be given assisted, and prove their continued eligibility and interest in seeking employment and independence. The dominant narrative that is opposed in the anti-poverty campaigns is that people living on low incomes are unproductive and dependent, deserving temporary limited help, surveillance and penalties to prod them into independence and a job.

The second set of narratives seems more general and obvious. Members of the public are leading actors searching for better society for themselves and others. They are responsible to imagine what is a good society and to tackle the barriers that prevent their search. This story line instructs people that they do not have to accept walking over homeless people in the streets. Nor should they pay taxes to support snitch lines that turn neighbour against neighbour and becomes another tool for abusive men to hurt their partners. The strength of this type of narrative is that it features leading parts for the public to play; it assumes the public cannot or should not be spectators to poverty. They are expected to oppose the messages such as: there is no alternative, there is no money in the budget, taxes are too high, and “the poor you shall have with you always.”

The search for a better world draws upon standards and comparisons. In this part of the story the public is joined by other actors from the government, civil society and social services. All seek standards and comparisons that help end child poverty, close the snitch lines, and abolish arbitrary welfare limits. For instance, the welfare snitch line campaigners presented evidence that no money was saved during the year

the snitch line operated compared to previous years; also, the economic and community costs for fraud investigations were higher in the city with a snitch line than costs of comparable cities without a snitch line.

The choice of standards needs attention. The campaigners did NOT compare poor Canadian children to the billions of children in other countries living in families with less than \$2 per day of income, but to children who are better off under Europe social policies. So too those in the British Columbia who campaigned against welfare limits refused to use the United States' standard of five year limits on welfare introduced in 1996; instead they argued that no other Canadian province or European country had limits on welfare, and that should be the standard for comparison.

In addition, all three campaigns built their resolutions around universal standards of humanity. For instance, faith groups resisted arbitrariness and appealed to unlimited mercy and compassion against for vulnerable people. Other groups drew upon the universal human rights written in the Canadian Constitution and international treaties, such as the right to adequate standards of living including food, clothing and shelter and special protection for children according to provisions in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Both these international treaties have been ratified by Canada. A Public Interest Advocacy Group for example used these universal standards to launch a constitutional appeal arguing that the arbitrary two year limit on welfare is not consistent with people's rights to security and equality as guaranteed by Sections 7 and 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada's constitution.

The last set of narratives provides stage directions about how to organize. There was no central coordinating committee nor leaders in any of the campaigns, although in each some people and organizations provided significant resources and leadership skills for a time especially in Campaign 2000. Nor was there a central strategy that members and groups needed to follow or persons in authority to authorize tactics. The search to abolish injustice and introduce universal standards provided direction as did the focus on particular times, such as the year 2000 or the first anniversary of snitch line. Individuals, groups and organizations, however, wrote their own plays, starred in their own scripts, and voluntarily decided when to engage in a particular activity. Even when I played a leading role in the ad hoc group in the local campaign to abolish the snitch line, I did not expect to approve or even know about most of the activities. In the provincial campaign to abolish the two year time limits, there was an amazing variety of initiatives, mostly uncoordinated, but singular in focus on abolishing the two year time limit before the April 1, 2004 deadline when it was expected that thousands of welfare recipients would be come to the end of their two years on welfare and be cut off and on the streets. People and groups not only refused to use energy to create a central organization or strategic plan, but they also insisted on figuring out for themselves what

arguments and strategies they could believe in that made sense for their particular audiences they were trying to convince. Faith groups used prayer vigils on the steps of the legislature and slept on the streets, while municipal politicians passed abolitionist motions and legal groups launched constitutional challenges through the courts.

Discussion Points

1. Abolition is a bold narrative, and has been used effectively by groups who wish to abolish government debt and those who want to end child poverty. What about the creation of alternatives? At what point do people need to engage in the alternative narrative –before, at the same time or after. Thomas Mathieson (1974; 2000), a leading abolitionist theorist is very clear that the construction of alternatives does not precede the abolitionist work. They are independent, and both essential. One does tolerate a specific injustice while waiting for others to create an alternative that too often is but a variation of what already exists.

2. A diverse approach with many opportunities for democratic decisions may work for a time, especially when there is a conjuncture either created or seized of a deadline in which outcome was uncertain and opposed. But when the deadlines pass, what happens. How to maintain the focus, diversity and democracy over the years? And what happens when a particular strategy or argument works against the central intent? In her 2004 book on social movements contesting globalization, Janet Conway identifies that those most active, committed and visible in a particular struggle shape the tactics and arguments. Social services and professional groups, such as Teachers Federation contributed substantial time to Campaign 2000, as did some business groups like the Body Shop. They favoured the “social investment” approach to ending child poverty as a way to appeal to a broad array of allies. But this investment argument emphasizes human capital and the future, leaving open the possibility that some children are not worth investing are selected as not worth the investment. Also children becomes means to the future well-being of society, not persons who have rights to well-being today and for themselves. The investment approach turned away from universal rights and caring for children because they are children. One of the most troublesome aspects of Campaign 2000, and the National Child Benefit is the focus on rewarding paid work: those families with adults with employment receive higher supplements than those on welfare.

3. I think we need to think more clearly about the role of government. Until I prepared this talk I hadn't seen so clearly how each of the three campaigns put governments into the leading roles. This choice may speak to people's faith in the legitimacy and importance of public representatives of the common good who are democratically elected. But what possibilities are opened up by this focus on representatives of the common good, and what openings are closed?

4. Finally, the most insidious backlash and opposition to the campaigns was around the notion of deserving and dependency. Very few people want to become poor, or take pride in a low income identity, as they may be proud of being Muslim, or black, or

aboriginal, or lesbian. Study after study show that the poor themselves feel they may be an exception and need help, but the majority of other poor people, especially those on welfare, need to be watched as they don't deserve help or manipulate the system. There is a strong desire in each of us to be not poor, to be deserving, to be strong and independent. If we scratch below our surfaces, I think many of us also hope to be just a little better off than the person next door, even when there is recognition that we are all dependent and equally deserving. The narratives of deserving and differences are powerful stories that continue to feed and reinforce the dominant narratives, and are most difficult to counter by anti-poverty activists and allies.

Endnotes

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- 1.>From the United Nations Human Poverty Index calculated by the United Nations Development Programme (2004, p. 150).
 2. Statistics Canada, “Low income rate (2000 income) by household status, Canada, provinces, territories, health regions and peer groups 2001”.
[Www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/82-221-XIE/00604/tables/html/226_01.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/82-221-XIE/00604/tables/html/226_01.htm), downloaded September 13, 2004.
 3. Annually Statistics Canada calculates a relative measure of poverty that varies by size of household and city, named the Low Income Cut-off. This measure has been used to estimate poverty rates for over twenty years; it reflects an income level at which an individual or family lives in straightened circumstances, spending significantly more of its income on food, shelter and clothing than the average family.
 4. Statistics Canada “Chapter VIII: Low Income” from Analysis of income in Canada, 2002, PDF version 75-203-XIE. Downloaded September 13, 2004,
www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/75-203-XIE/00002/part8.htm.
 5. Statistics Canada argues post tax calculations are preferable as the tax system is a major path to redistributing income in Canada; besides, people pay for goods with after tax dollars.
 6. Bradshaw and Finch (2003) examine various measures of poverty and argue it is not safe to rely on any one measure, but on overlapping measures to plan policies and campaigns.
 7. In 1980, the 10% of families with lowest incomes received \$1,276 on average in child benefits increasing to \$2,378 by 2000. Conversely, the 10% of families with the highest income had received on average \$1283 in 1980, but only \$26 by 2000 according to Statistics Canada www12.statcan.ca/english/census as reported by Michael Prince in a draft chapter for forthcoming, How Ottawa Spends “La Petit Vision, Les grands decisions: Chretien’s paradoxial record in social policy”. Document received Oct, 2003.
 8. Section 36 of the Employment and Assistance Act states that the lieutenant Govern-in-Council *may* make regulations for providing income assistance on a time-limited basis, and *may* make reductions in incomes after time periods. But it Regulations 26 and 27 that states assistance is provided for 24 out of 60 months, and how much monthly benefits *must* be reduced, and which months *must be excluded* from the count towards the maximum of 24 months.

9. For example, "A Policy analysis of the proposed B.C. Employment and Assistance Law" by M. Reitsma-Street, paper published electronically and in alternative media when Bill 26 and 27 introduced. See www.uvic.ca/spp/publications. April 1, 2003. See Debates of the Legislative Assembly, 3rd Session, 37th Parliament, Volume 6, starting April 16th, 2002.

10. Seth Klein and Andrea Long *A Bad time to be Poor: An Analysis of BC's Welfare Policies*. CCPA-BC and SPARC -BC, Vancouver. www.policyalternatives.ca. Various Welfare Fact Sheets on written by the Public Legal Education Program and distribution on www.povnet.org. See also six month reports by Community Reconstruction Project beginning June 2003 by Community Social Planning Council, Victoria, www.communitycouncil.ca and Lesley Moore "Income Assistance after the Cuts" Vancouver: End Legislated Poverty, August 28, 2002.

11. Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia Wayne Strelieff, "Review of Eligibility for Disability Assistance" Feb. 2004, www.bcauditor.com/PUBS/2003-04/Report6/Audit1.htm downloaded March 1, 2004. See also.

12. Seth Klein "Leaked numbers sound alarm on welfare time limits" Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative (BC), Opinion piece. October 30, 2003.

13. T. Mathiesen, *The Politics of Abolition*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget and Martin Robertson, 1974, p.15.

14. "Community groups prepare for constitutional challenge to welfare cut-off" BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre, www.bcpiac.com downloaded November 14, 2003; Sheilagh Day "Are welfare time limits constitutional?" *BC Commentary*, Vol 7(1), 2004, p. 4-5.

15. Motion on Reductions and Cutoffs of Income Assistance Benefits moved by Councillor Woodsworth sent in email to ewoods@vcn.bc.ca, and other activists, from WE*ACT Women Elders in Action | October 24, 2003

16. Sheila Potter "Many levels protest impending welfare cut-off" Weekend Edition, *Victoria News*, January 30, 2004, p. 3

17. Letter approved December 11, 2003 by the Diocese Council of the Anglican Church in the Vancouver Island Region, and received in a January 18, 2004 email from the Rev. Canon Dr. Harold Munn, Rector, The Church of St. John the Divine.

18. February 25 was selected for the vigil and night on the streets as it was Ash Wednesday and the last date cheques would go out to eligible persons before the April 1st

19. T. Gabel, J. Clemens, & S. LeRoy, "The reason for welfare time limits: They work" *Vancouver Sun*, November 15, 2003, p. C7.

20. Murray Coell, "Giving British Columbians every chance to work" *Times Colonist*, October 23, 2003, p. A11.

21. Ministry of Human Resources in British Columbia, "Time Limit Policy to Protect people in need" News release, February 6, 2004.
[Www.news.gov.bc.ca/nrm_new_releases/2004MHR0001-000080.htm](http://www.news.gov.bc.ca/nrm_new_releases/2004MHR0001-000080.htm) Downloaded Feb. 6, 2004

22. Lindsay Kines, "Province backs off plan for dramatic cuts to welfare" *The Vancouver Sun*, February 7, 2004 p. A1; see also Judith Lavoie "Welfare extension sees needy retain benefits" in *Times Colonist*, Feb. 7, 2004, P. B4.

23. "Cost of Eating in BC-Low income families are more desperate than ever", October 2003. Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, www.dietitians.ca/news/media.html summarized by one of authors Shefali Raja in Oct. 22, 2003 email distributed to social planning councils.

24. Murray Coell, "Giving British Columbians every chance to work" *Times Colonist*, October 23, 2003, p. A11.

25. Honorable Stan Hagan, Debates of the Legislative Assembly, Hansard, April 1, 2004, morning Vol 23, no. 4, page 10037.

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