

## ON CANADA'S MIND

### Why are the poor still with us?

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Political conservatives are always saying the government can't solve problems by throwing money at them. But at least one exception is poverty.

The simple reason Canadians don't throw money at poverty is that they aren't sure that would work.

In a poll for the Centre for Research and Information on Canada in 2002...

- 46% said the poor have it easy because "they can get government benefits without doing anything in return."
- 43%, on the other hand, said the poor "have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently."
- 48% agreed that the government has a responsibility to reduce the gap between high and low-income earners, but 49% disagreed.

In Gallup polls back to 1988 asking "which problem requires the greatest attention from the country's leaders?" the percentage saying poverty has never exceeded single digits.

In a Vector Research poll in November 2003 on the "issue or problem that affects or concerns you or your family the most" only 2% named poverty and 1% homelessness.

Poverty ranks low on the public's agenda of urgent issues because the poor don't pour into the streets the way folks turn out for peace marches, gay pride parades or anti-free-trade demonstrations.

The problem for poor people is that nobody is pro-poverty in the way there are free traders, homophobes and warmongers.

A 1999 Vector Research poll asked, Are people poor because they don't try hard enough to get ahead or because the wealthy and powerful keep them poor?

- In households with \$100,000+ annual incomes a plurality said the poor don't try hard enough while in households with sub-\$20,000 incomes a plurality blamed the rich.

Overall 35% blamed the wealthy for poverty. But 22% said the poor don't try hard enough, and 21% volunteered that poverty is a combination of both reasons (18% couldn't say one way or the other).

In the 1990's anti-poverty advocates were able to reboot the poverty issue by naming it child poverty. Even the Fraser Institute concedes that one in 10 children is poor. But sustaining interest even in helping poor kids has been difficult.

Another reason there is no demand to end poverty is that there is no consensus about what would work.

In a Léger poll in 2001 six out of 10 people said governments aren't doing enough to help the "poorest." People favoured a guaranteed minimum income by two to one in that study.

But more than half (57%) said the best way to fight poverty is to create more jobs. Only 12% said make the rich pay more, and just 5% said spend more on welfare.

The public worries that the poor will squander money they don't earn. In a COMPAS Research poll in 2002, by 65% to 32% respondents said the rich have a moral duty to help the poor. By 58% to 30%, however, people agreed welfare should have a cut-off "and not be for life."

Our strong work ethic chains us to the idea that adults are not entitled to income without effort. As a result Canadians divide the poor into segments: the deserving and the rest.

The income-distribution policies most popular with the public combine opportunity and initiative. That's why workfare sounds good to voters.

In 2002 Environics Research asked which one of these can "most help a person succeed in the world today."

- 27% said a university education, 23% a good work ethic, and 19% work skills learned on the job (another 19% said knowing how to get along with others).

The public doesn't trust governments' capacity to solve problems, another factor holding down public demand for a war on poverty.

- In 1989 in a Gallup Poll 84% said government has a responsibility to insure that "all citizens have the basic necessities of life regardless of circumstances." But Canadians no longer think poverty is the problem and government the solution.
- Thirteen years later just 56% said governments should have the primary responsibility for "caring for people who can't or won't care for themselves" (27% said families, 4% charities, and 3% religious organizations). (The data are from a COMPAS poll.)

Centre for Research and Information tracking polls show Canadians have become more impatient with the poor.

- In 1996, 41% agreed "there is no excuse for hunger and homelessness in a society like ours" while 57% said there will "always be people in society who will be hungry and homeless; it may be regrettable, but it is a fact of life."
- Seven years later 52% said there is no excuse for hunger and homelessness while the share saying poverty is inevitable had declined to 47%.

One reason more people are saying there is no excuse for poverty is that 72% believe there is a job for most people who want pay instead of public assistance.

The bad reputation associated with the word *welfare* is another obstacle to making poverty a major election issue. In an experiment Vector Research conducted a few years ago, interviewers asked half a national sample whether the government should spend more on "welfare" and

asked the other half if the government should spend more on “assistance for poor people.” Some 40% said spend more on assistance for the poor, but only 14% said spend more on welfare.

If the polls are right they show that poverty exists because there is no consensus on how to solve it or who is responsible. Economists, think tanks and politicians don’t even agree on how big a problem it is.

Statistics Canada, the government’s official number crunchers, estimates poverty afflicts 20% of Canadians. The right-wing Fraser Institute says it afflicts 8%. Most readers of the *Monitor* would accept the higher poverty point. The Statistics Canada figure seems right because the poor themselves say it is.

- 17% of adults sampled described themselves as poor in a nationwide Léger Marketing Research poll in 2001.

People may not be experts in poverty, but they are experts in their own feelings.

People on the political left try to turn the public’s attention to poverty by citing the official Statistics Canada figure – 20%. The polls show there’s a better way. If you want to motivate the public to attack poverty use the lower Fraser Institute figure. The high number makes poverty seem insurmountable or inevitable. It’s demoralizing. The low figure says it would not be too difficult to cure poverty as we know it.

Fund-raisers motivate us to give by reminding us that science is close to finding a cure for their charity’s disease. To mobilize the public against poverty we need hope, not statistics.

2004

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