

The Reality of the Past, Present,

BY BONNIE MORTON

Cet article fait un bref historique de la pauvreté et des droits humains au Canada depuis la Grande dépression et fait état de la volonté politique durant cette période, de se pencher sur ces problèmes.

In Canada, as well as around the world, people are given the impression that Canada is the best place in the world to live. This might be true if you are wealthy, but if you are one of the growing numbers of people living in poverty in this country you might have a different take on this statement. The global community is also given the impression that Canadian governments believe in and fight diligently to enhance and protect basic human rights. Impressions are similar to assumptions. Both look good from the outside and appear to be believable, but when you dig deeper into the reality of the above statements you find out that neither are true. This article will give a historical picture of Canada's initiatives to address poverty and human rights during and since the Great Depression.

The impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s was felt around the world. It hit everyone hard and fast. It left no one untouched. During this period many people lost their life savings—including the wealthy—when the stock market crashed. Prices and wages plummeted, unemployment rose to levels never experienced before. Adequate housing, food, clothing, fuel for heat and cars became difficult to obtain and eventually had to be rationed.

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People did what ever they could to provide for their families, sometimes resorting to illegal acts (robbing banks and people, bootlegging, etc.).

How did the Canadian government, then under the leadership of Prime Minister Bennett, address the issues of unemployment and poverty? He created what has become known as "relief camps" in remote areas across Canada. These camps were, in fact, labour camps where men were sent to work in return for (inadequate) shelter, food, and clothing. The residents of these camps were single, unemployed men, who were treated like

criminals. This approach kept the problem of high unemployment out of sight.

British Columbia had the largest numbers of relief camps, and it was here that men started to unionize. These men went on strike and protested for the right to real work and fair wages, adequate food, clothing, and shelter, an end to military discipline, an unemployment scheme, and the observance of workers' compensation laws. The men also wanted union recognition and the right to vote (SFL).

One thousand strikers hopped on freight trains to go to Ottawa and call on Bennett to meet their demands. The general public was in support of the efforts of these men, and helped to feed them on their way across the country. Bennett did not seem to be too concerned that this trek would raise public support, but by the time these men had reached Regina, their numbers had increased to 2,000. Sympathy for the "trekkers" continued to build. It has been said that 2,500 men were waiting in Winnipeg to join the trek. Bennett became very concerned and ordered the men stopped in Regina (SFL).

The men were prevented from leaving Regina but they were not ready to give up. It was agreed that eight men would go to Ottawa to negotiate with Prime Minister Bennett. These negotiations ended by Bennett refusing to consider their demands. Bennett told the leader of the men (Arthur Evans) that,

he was a thief, and that the strike was a revolution, and that the purpose of the trek was to destroy law and order, and Evans called Bennett a liar. (SFL 8)

The "Trek" delegation returned to Regina. On July 1, 1935 approximately 2,700 Regina residents met with 300 trekkers at Regina's Market Square. The RCMP and the city police started attacking the people, beating them with clubs, and shooting at them. The riot began around 8:15 p.m.; the worst was over by midnight. One hundred people were wounded (trekkers, citizens, and police). Seventeen were treated for gunshot wounds and one police officer died (SFL).

This was how the federal government of the day responded to high levels of unemployment and poverty, and to the people who were calling for change to address these issues. It is believed that Prime Minister's orders to attack the people of Regina and the trekkers on that fateful day was the political downfall of Bennett and his party. These

and Future of Human Rights in Canada

events and continued public pressure eventually lead to the passing of the Unemployment and Social Insurance legislation, and in 1940 our Constitution was amended to incorporate the *Unemployment Insurance Act*.

Just as the economy seemed to be on the verge of stabilizing the Second World War broke out and Canada joined England in 1939 to fight against Nazi Germany. At home, people continued to live on rationed commodities, so that food and fuels could be used to assist the war efforts and our men overseas. The difference now was that many women worked outside the home, replacing men in the workforce. After WWII there was a major initiative put in place to create employment opportunities as many soldiers returning home from the war did not have jobs to return to.

WWII was a period in history when all levels of society world wide were striving to create more peaceful and secure communities to live in. Before WWII was over, several nation states held a number of conferences to address the need for an international body that would be able to ensure peace and security after the war was over. The United Nations (UN) thus came into being. Canada worked at the international, as well as the national level, trying to create ways and means of preventing future war, dealing with rampant unemployment rates, and increasing poverty. It was during these sessions with the founders of the UN that international leaders realized that peace meant more than just being free from war. Peace also meant to be free from poverty and exploitation.

As Canadians, we have always taken pride in the fact that our Canadian representative, John P. Humphrey, head of the Human Rights Secretariat of the United Nations in 1947, drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Nevertheless, while Canada supported the creation of the United Nations, it struggled over the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was due to the fact that Canada was actually in violation of a few of the Declaration's articles. During this time Canada still held Canadian Japanese people in internment camps (imprisoned because they were of Japanese ancestry), Aboriginal people did not have a vote in their own country, and Canada still practiced the death penalty. The articles that dealt with an adequate standard of living were perceived to be, from Canada's point of view, "a statement of political economy, and not human rights" (Shabos 414-5). It appears that some of our

government and UN delegates (Lester B. Pearson in particular) still did not have the full vision of what it would take to create the kind of just society required to prevent war and exploitation while ensuring security.

The Canadian delegation tried to hold up the adoption of the Declaration by suggesting that the nations hold off ratifying the document until the finer points could be worked out. When this ploy did not work, Canada abstained from voting. The only other countries that abstained were the Soviet Six, China, and Lebanon. This move shocked Canadian allies as it appeared that Canada was supporting the other abstaining countries. It was due to this embarrassment that Canada finally voted in favour of the Declaration on December 10, 1948, although the Canadian delegation did abstain from voting on articles concerning education and the right to cultural life (Shabos).

Over the years since the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Canada has been more amenable to supporting the development of basic human rights in the areas of social, economic, civil, and political rights. In 1966 the UN ratified both the Economic Social and Cultural Rights Covenant and the Civil and Political Rights Covenant. Due to Canada's distinct government make-up of provincial and federal governments, the federal government could not ratify these Covenants until they had the support of every province and territory for the commitments and obligations of the Covenants. Upon receiving the provincial and territorial support needed, Canada was able to ratify both Covenants in 1976.

It should be noted that in 1966 Canada, without any formal international commitments, did put into legislation the Canada Assistance Plan Act (CAP) which provided the people of Canada with specific economic rights that fall within the Social and Economic and Cultural Rights Covenant. These were the right to: adequate income when in need, the right to an appeal, and the right to work freely chosen. This legislation was also the first piece of legislation in the history of this country that held both the provincial and federal governments equally financially re-

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sponsible for the social and economic well-being of all people, including poor people living in Canada. Within 20 years of the Second World War, Canada had finally committed itself to the belief that economic and social rights are basic human rights.

The federal and provincial governments also worked in unison to put in place legislation and programs that would ensure basic social, economic, civil and political rights were being protected in Canada. This commitment for ensuring and protecting the human rights was further strengthened when these rights were enshrined in our Constitution, with the incorporation of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, in 1982. If these rights were to be accessible to the disadvantaged people within this country there also had to be a way in which they could use domestic remedies (the court system) to protect these rights. In 1985, the Court Challenges Program was put in place to assist disadvantaged people by financially funding litigation against the federal government for section 15 arguments. Section 15 states that:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (Court Challenges Program 1-2)

Nevertheless, the Court Challenges Program can only fund litigation against the federal government, while the majority of violations to economic, social, civil, and political rights are being committed at the provincial level. This means that poor people across Canada often have no way of challenging provincial governments for violating their basic human rights.

Over the past 52 years tools have been developed on both the international and the national levels to make social, economic, civil, and political rights real and meaningful for everyone. Although these human rights have been identified, and both levels of our governments have an obligation to uphold these rights, we now find that these rights—our most basic human rights—are being ignored by both our federal and provincial governments. It seems that the farther we get away from the devastating reality of the Great Depression and WWII the easier it has become for some of the general public and our political leaders to ignore the human rights protections that we have long struggled to put in place.

In the late 1980s the then Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, entered into the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States. This agreement stated that our social programs (i.e. Unemployment Insurance, and social assistance) were unfair subsidies. Thus began the dismantling of these programs. When Canada signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), any remaining social programs quickly eroded and hundreds

of thousands of jobs disappeared.

We were told that these changes were necessary because of our national deficit. The reality is that these changes have occurred because our governments are living up to trade agreements that go well beyond agreements of trade, to dictating the destruction of our social and economic security systems that took years to put into place. Not only are trade agreements determining how our government is to dismantle our social programs, so is the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Since 1993, and maybe before, our federal government has been taking directive and incorporating every recommendation of the IMF (see, ("Structural Adjustment in Canada").

The past two federal governments, the Progressive Conservatives, and the Liberals, have dismantled programs that took many years to put in place. To get public support for these changes, these governments have targeted poor people, and used them as bait to sway public opinions. When the government wanted to overhaul the *Unemployment Insurance (UI) Program*, politicians made public statement that people on UI were sitting at home drinking beer. Similar statements were made about welfare recipients. Statements of this kind turned the public against already vulnerable people. We need to remember that these government officials are supposed to be protecting the people, the most vulnerable, not using them as pawns in the game our governments are now playing for profits and greed.

As provincial governments have less money to provide services, provincial politicians also began to make similar statements about the poor. In Ontario, the government withdrew a special allowance for pregnant women on social assistance that was intended to allow them to be able to have an adequate and nutritious diet while they were pregnant. In Saskatchewan the government gives the public the impression that we have "deserving" and "undeserving" poor people. If you are working or disabled you are deserving of public support, but if you are unfortunate and do not have a job, you and your children are considered the undeserving poor. This is demonstrated by the way in which the provincial government claws back the federal government increase to children of welfare families. This money is then used in programs to assist *only* the children of working-poor families.

The attacks on the poor and the dismantling of social programs is happening all across this country. The political and economic decisions that are being made today have nothing to do with enhancing and ensuring that people in Canada will retain social, economic, and civil and political rights.

Poor people in Canada have not been sitting idle while their human rights have been violated. In 1993, 1995, and 1998 anti-poverty groups (Charter Committee on Poverty Issues, National Anti-Poverty Organization, and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women), church groups, and labour groups joined together to present cases of social and economic violations before the

Economic Social and Cultural Rights Committee of the United Nations. On all occasions Canada was found to be in violation of a number of sections within the Economic Social and Cultural Rights Covenant. Canada's violations have raised concern within the UN. Canada has not only been found in violation of human rights obligations by the Economic Social and Cultural Rights Committee, but they were also found in violation of a number of civil and political rights by the Human Rights Committee in 1999. These committees have made a number of valid recommendations to the Canadian government, of which virtually all of these violation (with the exception of half of one recommendation) have been ignored by our federal and provincial governments

We have to realize that our governments no longer work for us. They have given their allegiance to outside interests (U.S.A., and IMF). We need to continue to use whatever resources we have available (public pressure, public actions, elections, our court system, and the UN) to fight for our basic human rights and regain control of our country. The strength and the commitment of the on-to-Ottawa trekkers during the Great Depression, and the response of the general public to that act, made a difference then. Our strength and commitment to enhance and ensure the social, economic, civil, and political rights of everyone living in this country—and around the world—can make a difference now.

Bonnie Morton has lived in poverty most of her life. She has been very active on social and economic issues at the local, provincial, national and international levels. Bonnie has worked for the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry, of the Regina Presbytery of the United Church of Canada, (formerly known as the Downtown Chaplaincy), since 1988. She is a social and economic justice advocate for individuals, she provides public education on poverty issues, and challenges system discrimination.

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WE DEMAND THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT:

14. Strengthen the employment equity legislation and guarantee the right of employees and unions to appeal Human Rights Commission and Tribunal - decisions.

15. Adopt pro-active, enforceable and appealable legislation on pay equity, with employee and union participation.

16. Develop guidelines on harassment based on sex, race, ethnicity, language, social condition, age, sexual orientation and disability to be proposed to all provinces and territories as model guidelines, and that could be used in evaluating provincial compliance with human rights norms.

17. Provide all work-related human rights and union protections to domestic workers, regardless of immigration status.

18. Recognize the foreign accreditations of women, particularly women from Africa, Asia, the Mid-East and Latin America and provide special funding for professional and linguistic integration programs and accreditation testing, as well as for skills-training.

19. Institute a national minimum wage of \$10 an hour in all areas of federal jurisdiction.

20. Allocate \$2 billion to an early childhood development fund in the year 2000 as a first increment of a five-year plan to institute a non-profit, publicly funded and accountable, cross-Canada system of universally accessible early childhood care, education and parent support services.

21. Develop and legislate a comprehensive range of family leave policies that do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, including paid and unpaid extended maternity leave, parental, child-care, elder care and dependent care leave and which provide full protection for those who wish to return to the labour force after extended care giving periods.

22. Sign and follow two important International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions: one on home work and the other on part-time work. The vast majority of workers in these sectors are women and we deserve equal treatment, in pay, health and safety, maternity protection, training, protection against discrimination and the right to organize, that the ILO conventions require.

23. Provide to all people who are on Canadian territory the right to benefit from fundamental social and economic rights, such as health care, education, and social security.

24. Ensure immediate landing and permanent residence for women who immigrate in order to be reunited with a spouse, without having to be subjected to any sponsorship obligations.