



From the National Film Board of Canada production,
For Fitcher, For Poorer

THE CHILDREN'S BENEFIT

What does it really mean?

By Josephine Grey

Les pauvres ne souffrent pas seulement d'un manque d'argent. Leur situation empire lorsque les critères concernant le revenu, les impôts, le logement et les programmes de garde d'enfants sont complexes, mal coordonnés et que les taux ne contribuent pas à justifier l'assistance. Les prestations pour enfants du gouvernement fédéral n'ont pas ajouté un cent au revenu des familles les plus défavorisées du Canada, sauf si elles ont trois enfants ou plus. Dans son article, l'auteure souligne que si nous ne luttons pas pour nos enfants maintenant, l'avenir ne s'annonce pas rose.

Because healthy children make a healthy society, all societies must provide well for all children. All children ultimately depend on the socio-economic structure and those who control it for survival. Canada has signed the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and therefore made a commitment to this concept. The federal government furthermore promised to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000. All the wealthy nations of the world except the United States take care of children better than Canada does.

The need to adapt to changing circumstances is primary to all parents. Moving from employment assistance, to training, and back to employment as so many must, should not deprive low-income people's children of their livelihood or force them out of the family and into institutional care or onto the street. Unreasonable limits on peoples' freedom to choose, and adjust the balance of work versus child care time, to home care versus family time, interfere with a family's ability to sustain itself.

If parents are to provide for family needs, they must have economic security. A Children's Benefit *should* begin to provide some security because it does not depend on the source of income.

Low-income families in Canada do not presently have access to the resources to raise healthy children. The federal Children's Benefit was supposed to help bridge the gap, but for most, it will accomplish nothing. In fact, the people who stand to gain the most are those with four or more kids with an income over \$60,000 a year!

For poor people, lack of money makes life hard enough. Life becomes even harder when criteria for income, tax, housing and child care programmes are complex and uncoordinated, and the rates do not add up to the reason for the assistance. The need for assistance becomes a labyrinth for many and a prison for others. To face barriers like language, racism, lack of formal education, or disability, condemns people to having to ask for permission to change categories. You cannot choose where, or when, or how you believe you should work or care for your family. Almost everything you need is at the end of a line-up, where everyone has to stand, and where

you are branded unfit, no matter why you're there.

It is a lack of coordination between government policies which creates mind-numbing catch-22s, and a lack of concern for the impact of neglect which allows poverty to continue. It is therefore truly shocking when a government claims to care whilst it merely serves its own ends.

The federal Children's Benefit has not added a dime to the money the poorest families receive unless they have three or more children. People on social assistance receive the same amount as before except for the \$75 each extra for three or more children. Indeed, because the Christmas and Spring child tax credit will be divided into 12 payments, it will take away the one chance poor families ever had to replace furniture, buy Christmas presents, or pay debts accumulated over the year.

Worse still, the proposed change could add to the undue hardship suffered by families on social assistance if provincial governments deduct the benefit from the amount paid for children. Saskatchewan deducts family allowance from welfare and other provinces could well be tempted to follow suit as they try to make up for the higher debts the federal government has dumped on them. There must at least be an agreement to ensure that the combined amount of social assistance payments and child benefits is not reduced.

The maximum earned income credit applies to a tiny portion of the population and is the only piece that will cost the government extra. Furthermore, because all tax credits are only partially indexed, the Children's Benefit and the earned income credit (not to mention the Goods and Services Tax credit) will, in time, have less value and fewer people will receive them. In fact, in only two years people will be losing, compared to what they will get this year.

The government has taken three billion dollars from the child tax credit system over the past three to four years through de-indexation. The \$400 million they've added will be eroded in no time. After the cuts to the Canada Assistance Plan (which was supposed to pay half of social assistance costs), the total amount of money they have stolen from children is outrageous.

This is sneaky, unethical social policy

which tosses a bone to the working poor, and sends a loud message to people on social assistance: "We don't care if you starve, and we're going to punish you for not working even though there are no jobs." They will be gouging more from the pot year after year. Some child poverty strategy! If their goal is to keep people trapped on social assistance to ensure that the poverty industry has clients, then they have done a good job. But they have sold a very high per cent of this country's future citizens down the river. They won't eliminate poverty, but they may eliminate some people.

The only silver lining in this gloomy cloud is that the monthly payment system will allow the Ontario government to step in with a child tax benefit of its own, which would be added to the federal benefit and be given to working families as well as families on social assistance. Children would then be off the welfare system and people would be able to change from

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assistance to employment or training without losing their Children's Benefits. This would help allow for freedom of choice and simplify the system. As well, the sales tax credit could be enriched, replacing the lost Christmas payment for those who don't have enough money to save.

In these hard times, it may be difficult to persuade the Ontario government to make their Children's Benefits high enough, but if they meant a word they said before they were elected and if they care about the future of children they will do something. The federal Children's Benefit is still just a proposal. It's up to you and me to put the pressure on to improve it.

We would not have Medicare or Mother's Allowance or Unemployment Insurance benefits or Workmen's Compensation Board benefits if people in the past had not fought hard for social justice. If we don't fight now for our children, the

future looks grim indeed. After all, even if one didn't care that many children are hungry and oppressed, if too many children grow up in poverty, who will pay for the old age pensions of the baby boom generation? Did the feds ever think about that?

If the Children's Benefit is not to help kids, what is it for? For fooling people into thinking the government cares, so that it can buy votes. So much for ending child poverty by the year 2000.

Josephine Grey is a community activist and single mother of four children. She is President of LIFT; Co-Chair of FoodShare, a community development organisation focussing on alternatives to food banks; Vice-President of Project Esperance, a non-profit housing corporation; and a member of the Low Income Relief Working Group, a sub-committee of the Fair Tax Commission.

LIFT is an organization run by low income people for low income people dedicated to fighting for social justice for women and children. It is currently involved in organizing the Ontario portion of a national poor people's conference to set the agenda for the federal election; a public education project aimed at getting accurate information about everything from the tax structure to the latest ideas about employment for people on welfare out to the low income community in accessible language; and pushing the NDP to live up to its commitment to social assistance reform in Ontario. The LIFT Resource Education Centre helps people in crisis fight their way through the system to have their needs met, offers the use of office equipment to low income people and groups with similar interests, and collects resources for the community. LIFT needs volunteers. If you can help, please call Linda Walsh or Sonya Blois at (416) 392-6651.