

New momentum in poverty battle

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They took a leap of faith and they still don't know where they're going to land.

But two days after the election, the leaders of Ontario's anti-poverty movement are feeling unusually positive. They have a commitment from Premier Dalton McGuinty to introduce firm poverty reduction targets and a conviction that their voices are finally beginning to count.

During the campaign, they resolved to set aside their differences, their shopping lists and their doubts to press for a legislated poverty reduction plan.

Today, they have a pledge that one will come.

Social activists don't need to be reminded that McGuinty has broken his word in the past. They are still waiting for the 20,000 affordable homes, 25,000 subsidized child-care spaces and welfare improvements he promised four years ago.

Nor do they need to be told that the Liberal fiscal plan makes no allowance for a poverty reduction strategy.

But they cite five reasons for optimism:

The approach they are advocating has worked elsewhere. Britain, Quebec and Newfoundland have all adopted poverty reduction plans and made tangible gains.

The province has a healthy surplus. The Liberals won't be able to claim, as they did in 2003, that they can't afford to honour their commitments to low-income Ontarians.

Last spring's budget was a belated step in the right direction. Its centrepiece, a new Ontario Child Benefit, provides a base on which a long-term anti-poverty strategy can be built.

They've built a coalition that will be hard to ignore. More than 30 organizations – representing health-care practitioners, teachers, unionized workers, a wide range of social service providers, a cross-section of immigrant groups and all of the major religious communities –

have joined the campaign to fight for a 25 per cent reduction in poverty within five years.

And public opinion seems to be running in their favour. A poll taken by Ipsos Reid in early September for the Daily Bread Food Bank showed that 45 per cent of Ontarians believed poverty reduction should be a "high priority" for their next government.

This isn't to say the path ahead will be smooth.

The coalition has already been knocked off course once. It sought an unequivocal endorsement of its "25 in 5" plan (to cut poverty by 25 per cent within five years) from the incoming premier. All McGuinty offered was a promise to announce his own target within a year.

Some members were tempted to denounce this ill-defined proposal. But the group held its fire, opting to work within the premier's framework.

"It is risky and it will be tricky," said lawyer Cindy Wilkey, who works for the Income Security Advocacy Centre. "Without tight time frames, it can turn into Yak, Yak, Yak and no action."

A second challenge will be to hold the movement together, now that the discipline of the election is gone.

The fault lines run deep. To moderates, an incremental poverty reduction plan is a sign of political maturity. To hard-liners, it is a retreat from grassroots activism. To academics and social workers, targets and timetables are the way to get governments moving. To low-income families, they are a poor substitute for decent wages, affordable housing and income support programs that allow them to eat properly.

Finally, the coalition will have to proceed without strong allies on opposition benches. Neither the Tories nor the New Democrats bought into their election strategy.

John Tory, the most progressive Conservative leader in 20 years, said it would be irresponsible to set objectives without knowing how to pay for them.

Howard Hampton, who has always stood with low-income voters, said he would not engage in "empty promises."

Should the Liberals let them down, anti-poverty activists will be isolated.

It adds up to an uncertain outlook. The possibility of disappointment is very real. But the possibility of progress – after years of blockage, reversals and inertia from Queen's Park – is tantalizing.

For now, anti-poverty activists choose to hope.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.