

Fight to end poverty a hard sell

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Poverty will always be with us.

You've heard the refrain. You've seen the helpless shrug.

But does it have to be that way?

A growing number of social activists say no. And they point to countries in Europe and provinces right here at home that have cut poverty by drafting plans, setting goals, dedicating funds – and measuring progress.

In short, where political leaders make fighting poverty a priority, the poor see results, says Gail Nyberg, head of Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank.

She points to Britain, where former prime minister Tony Blair pledged to cut child poverty by 25 per cent in five years. While he narrowly missed his 2005 goal, (it dropped by 23 per cent) the country made real progress and the government has redoubled its efforts to meet its target of halving child poverty by 2010, she says.

In Quebec, which has a law requiring the government to fight poverty, child poverty has plummeted to less than 10 per cent in 2005 from 22 per cent in 1996.

Armed with these precedents, food banks, and other anti-poverty groups have been pressing candidates in Ontario's Oct. 10 election to put poverty on the political agenda and make meaningful commitments.

Did they succeed?

In a campaign dominated by the debate over public funding for faith-based schools, there was little talk around the water cooler or on radio phone-in shows about poverty reduction strategies, affordable housing, the minimum wage or welfare rates. This despite the fact the *Star* has run numerous articles and commentaries on the issue.

Still, there was a rally at Queen's Park and a concert at Massey Hall calling for action on poverty. Activists organized numerous all-candidates meetings across the province on the issue. And the party leaders themselves staged campaign events highlighting how they would reduce poverty in Ontario.

"To see the Liberal party and the NDP lining up – I think – together on this and (Progressive Conservative Leader) John Tory saying he also believes there needs to be some sort of a strategy is really significant," says Cindy Wilkey, of the Income Security Advocacy Centre which has produced a party check list on its website (incomesecurity.org).

So how do the parties stack up?

None of them have taken up the call to cut child poverty by 25 per cent in five years and by 50 per cent in 10 years – a campaign similar to the British model and endorsed by groups ranging from teachers federations to religious organizations.

But when Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty pledged last week to set firm poverty reduction targets within a year if elected, activists heralded it as a major step forward. NDP Leader Howard Hampton dismissed McGuinty's pledge as more empty promises. And despite a news release on the NDP website endorsing the so-called "25 in five" poverty reduction goal, Hampton has refused to champion the idea.

Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory agrees Ontario needs a strategy, but wouldn't commit to one until he knew what it would entail. And he wouldn't agree to any goals unless he knew they could be met.

The proverbial elephant in the room on all this, of course, is money: None of the parties have allocated any cash to a poverty reduction plan. And on specific party initiatives geared to the poor, few dollars are attached.

Even the NDP, which historically has been most progressive on the issue, didn't include government funding to cut poverty as one of its six major campaign priorities. The only priority item on the NDP platform dealing with poverty – an immediate \$10 minimum wage – is aimed at "hard-working families" and arguably costs governments little.

Still, that's better than the Liberals, who are sticking to their spring budget plan to wait until 2010 to raise the minimum wage to \$10.25. The Tories would seek advice from experts before approving any increases. The Green Party promises to raise it until a person working 40 hours a week earns more than poverty wages, but that's as specific as it gets.

On social assistance, the Liberals pledge nothing beyond their previous commitment to raise rates by 2 per cent next month. The NDP promises to raise rates to cover living costs and to put future increases in the hands of an independent panel. But they have not attached any money to the promise. A similar plan put forward by the Green Party doesn't carry a price tag either.

The parties have made some budget commitments on affordable housing, child care and dental benefits for low-income families. And all say they will support the Liberals' newly created Ontario Child Benefit, worth up to \$1,100 per child to low-income families by 2011.

In the case of child care, both the Liberals and the NDP are putting all their funding into full-day junior and senior kindergarten, a move that would free up space in daycares.

But those plans are at least two or three years away and child care needs money now, activists say – especially since the Liberals never kept their 2003 election promise to spend \$300 million in new provincial funds in the area.

The Tories say they will "continue to invest" in child care but don't say how much. Only the Greens say they will spend an additional \$300 million annually on child care.

Financial commitments to dental care are better. The Liberals say their summer-time pledge to spend \$45 million a year on services for low-income families will be the first step in their poverty reduction strategy and the NDP promises to spend \$100 million. But the Tories and Greens are silent on the issue.

On housing, the NDP has the most detailed plan, including \$44.5 million earmarked for 10,000 new rent supplements to help low-income people pay for apartments in privately owned buildings. All three major parties say they will address the backlog of repairs to aging public housing stock across the province, but only the Tories have developed a specific plan with money attached.

The reluctance to talk about money when it comes to helping the poor is troubling to activist Wilkey, who says some \$15 billion in tax revenues were drained from Ontario during the late 1990s under Mike Harris' Conservative government. "You can talk about all these priorities but unless we are actually prepared to deal with the fiscal capacity of the province, we can't move forward significantly on many things," she says.

"I may be a Pollyanna, but I'm hoping that the commitment to developing a comprehensive strategy (to fight poverty) will be realized," Wilkey says. "I'm hoping that it will provide an opportunity to have a broader discussion about the real cost of not investing in the quality of life in our communities and in the people who are losing ground while others are gaining ground quite significantly."

So, will the poor soon be a vanishing breed?

Derek Ballantyne, president of the Toronto Community Housing Corporation, which oversees a crumbling network of 58,500 public housing units that had been largely ignored until the election, is delighted that all three major political parties have weighed in on the issue.

But he knows when it comes to helping the poor, the devil is in the details.

"Maybe we've been successful at translating the notion that the poor will always be with us into: We will always have to address issues of the poor."