

DEBATES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

(Hansard)

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Morning Sitting

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POVERTY

J. Brar: I rise to make a statement with regard to a very important public policy area, the issue of growing poverty. Poverty is growing in every community in British Columbia since the Liberal government took over in 2001. The Liberal government has attacked the social safety net in British Columbia by making public policy changes to attack the most vulnerable people in the province and by not having the vision and political will to address the issue of growing poverty. The growing poverty in B.C. is a direct result of one-sided policies and a mean-spirited approach of this government.

To begin with, let me provide some facts from the various reports which have been produced by many independent agencies in the province of British Columbia as well as in the country of Canada.

First, British Columbia has the worst income gap between rich and poor among all the provinces of the country. In 2004 the average market income of poor families in B.C. was just \$8,800, compared to the average income of \$148,000 for rich families. In other words, the poor earned only 6 percent of what the rich people earned in the province.

Second, B.C. has the highest child poverty rate in the country as compared to other provinces. We have the highest child poverty in this province as well. We are a rich province in the country, but one where the most vulnerable people — 24 percent of our kids — have been left out by this government. In other words, nearly one of every four children lives under poverty in British Columbia.

Third, every month over 24,000 children in B.C. use the food bank, as per the HungerCount of last year.

Fourth, the GVRD homeless count indicates that the number of homeless people has doubled since the government took over — up to 2,174 from 1,121. This count includes 40 families with children.

Fifth, the number of homeless people in Surrey has increased by 140 percent during the last five years. The situation is even worse when we talk about the Vancouver downtown area.

It is not limited to the Vancouver downtown area when we talk about homelessness, which used to be the case if you go back some years. But now homelessness has become a provincewide problem. Other communities, such as Kelowna, Kamloops, Prince George, Victoria and Nanaimo, are also faced with growing homelessness in their communities.

Seventh, a third of B.C.'s food bank clients are children, and over 50 percent of food bank users are families on income assistance.

Today we are going to hear from the farmworkers. This is a group of people who have been excluded from the Employment Standards Act, which is applied to all other working people in the province.

The list goes on. This government has millions of dollars to spend on advertisements every year. The government has millions of dollars for hefty pay increases for the political appointees of this government. The

government is not concerned at all when it comes to the cost overruns in many projects across the province — \$400 million cost overruns for one project only, known as the convention centre. When we ask the minister, the minister is not concerned about the \$400 million in taxpayer dollars for the cost overruns.

When it comes to the average working family and the most vulnerable people in the province, this government's approach for the last five years has been one-sided and very mean-spirited. The question we need to ask is: why, at a time when B.C. has the biggest surplus, is the number of people living under poverty growing? Why, at a time when B.C. has the biggest surplus, is the number of homeless people growing in the province?

Those are very fundamental questions we need to ask, which this government should have asked themselves during the last five years. There must be a cause, and you know what the cause is? The cause is this government — the members sitting on that side. That is the cause of what we see in the province.

They have created a new class of working poor by introducing the \$6-an-hour training wage. That was a mistake at that time. That is a mistake today. That will be a mistake in the future. We have called upon the government to raise the minimum wage to \$10. If Ontario can do it, B.C. must do it.

B.C. Liberals are the only government in the country which has taken away the earning exemption from the people on income assistance — the only province in the country — which, in the opinion of many professional people, the experts, is a very important incentive for people to move on from welfare to work. Even the Fraser Institute has indicated very clearly that that's a mistake.

In 2002 the B.C. Liberal government brought in the Employment and Assistance Act, which introduced several barriers for people accessing income assistance. The first was the three-week work search. The government now makes all applicants search for work for three weeks before they can even access income assistance.

Second, the two-year independence test. People have to clearly demonstrate before they can access income assistance that they have been independent for two years. The end result of that is more homeless.