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Claude Richmond
Minister of Employment and Income Assistance
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July 20, 2006

Dear Minister Richmond,

I am writing to ask that your Ministry:

- Immediately raise the rates of income assistance in our province by at least 50%, and that those rates be tied to inflation.
- Immediately raise the minimum wage to \$10 per hour, and end the \$6 per hour “training wage.”

The success of an income assistance program can be measured by the extent to which it decreases poverty. To my puzzlement and frustration, you have publicly cited as a measure of success that fewer people receive income assistance benefits, without any reference to poverty rates at all. For example, this spring you stated in the legislature:

“To date we've placed more than 46,000 of our clients directly into jobs — good jobs like painters, security officers, and hotel desk clerks. We've encouraged thousands more to find jobs on their own. This means there are over 112,000 British Columbians who no longer rely on income assistance, including 48,000 children who now have greater opportunities and more promising futures.”¹

You are likely correct that, in many cases, a person or family will be better off relying on employment as a painter or desk clerk than relying on income assistance benefits. However, this comparison is meaningless unless two conditions are met: First, the wages and job conditions related to the employment must be sufficient to raise the person or family out of poverty. If not, the figures you cite are nothing to celebrate. Second, the income assistance rates must be sufficient to provide for the person or family's basic needs. Otherwise, there is no sense to the claim that people are better off when employed; indeed, on this logic if there were no income assistance at all, people who be “better off” earning 5 cents a day.

In my view, your claim that thousands of British Columbian children now have “greater opportunities” and “more promising futures” *because their parents no longer receive public assistance* is flawed. The two conditions I described above have not been fulfilled, and we have no reason to think that that these children are less poor, or that

¹ British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (March 23, 2006), at 1505 (Claude Richmond), online: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/hansard/38th2nd/H60323p.htm>.

poverty has been reduced in British Columbia. In fact, a report released recently by the National Council of Welfare concludes that poverty rates for children are growing and are higher in British Columbia than anywhere else in Canada.²

When I hear you state that our income assistance programs are succeeding because people are no longer receiving help, I feel angry because I do not believe you are ignorant of this information. Therefore, I cannot help but conclude that you are satisfied to mislead British Columbians about whether or not our income assistance programs are working: that is, whether or not they are reducing poverty.

However, it is well within your power to make these claims true. You can take action that will render these claims meaningful. You can raise the rates of income assistance so that any comparisons with life on welfare will be comparisons that involve moving up *beyond* a situation in which a person or family's basic needs are already met. You can work with other Ministries to raise the minimum wage, so that when a person finds employment, they will not just be increasing their resources, but increasing them to a point that no longer holds them in poverty. I ask that you:

- **Immediately raise the rates of income assistance in our province by at least 50%, and that those rates be tied to inflation.**
- **Immediately raise the minimum wage to \$10 per hour, and end the \$6 per hour “training wage.”**

Mr. Richmond, you and I live in a very prosperous place, in a very prosperous time, and to argue that we cannot afford to reduce poverty in our society is simply not credible. Indeed, the fact that so many people in British Columbia live in poverty is an outrage that has been noted by several committees of the United Nations.³ **As a citizen of B.C., I ask you to take up the most basic purpose of your ministry, and take these actions to reduce poverty in British Columbia.**

Thank you for your immediate attention to this issue.

Patricia Cochran

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² National Council of Welfare, 2002 and 2004 Poverty Profile (Summer 2006), online: http://www.nccwb.ca/htmldocument/principales/onlinepub_e.htm.

³ For example, see the Concluding Comments of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, online: www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/E.C.12.CAN.CO.5.pdf.