

ISARC

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

"Faith Communities In Action Against Poverty"

ISARC e-Newsletter, February 2010

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Social Audit Happenings

by Bruce Voogd, ISARC Coordinator

ISARC's Social Audit is beginning to take shape across the province with the first one already happening in the Waterloo Region on Thursday, February 25. As local planning groups across the province put their plans in place, momentum is building.



The Social Audit will provide a social assessment of the impact of government policy, including its benefits and limitations, on groups of people. It will assess current government policies on social assistance and the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy.

During the Social Audit, we will listen to persons with lived experience of poverty and take note of their ideas for improvement, because it is time for their voices to be heard.

We will engage faith groups, non-profit groups, and advocacy organizations to work together at the local level so that people active in providing charity can be re-energized to continue their advocacy work towards poverty elimination.

We will engage religious and civic leaders to listen, to become supportive of anti-poverty measures, and to speak out in their communities. And we will increase pressure on Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPPs) to make poverty elimination even more prominent in the current provincial government agenda and to have poverty elimination on the 2011 election platform for their parties.

Go to www.isarc.ca/socialaudit2010.html to learn all about the Social Audit, to find out when and where the Hearing will take place, and to access updated Guidelines and various resources we have put together. There are new resources being added to the website as they are developed.

If you would like to become a part of the Social Audit in your local area, contact ISARC at info@isarc.ca.

Is the cupboard really bare?

by Hugh Mackenzie

Hugh Mackenzie - www.hughmackenzie.ca - is a respected Toronto-based economist who has worked for over 30 years on public policy issues with the trade union movement, the private sector, and government. Hugh is also the co-chair and principal analyst for the Ontario Alternative Budget project of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

To listen to some of the commentary leading up to the Ontario and federal budgets, you would think our governments were foundering in bankruptcy with no hope of recovery without draconian cuts and widespread belt-tightening.

And of course, according to conservative commentary, it goes without saying that policy luxuries like poverty reduction have to be taken off the table.



Maybe a dose of perspective is in order.

To begin with, we're not dealing with some unprecedented calamity here. Canada and Ontario have been through deep recessions before. Our governments have operated with deep deficits before. And budget balances have recovered before. The fact that fiscal balances have recovered before is not of any particular relevance to the situation we face today. What's interesting is how our fiscal balances recovered.

When you look back at the recessions Ontario has been through in the past 30 years, what is striking is that the size of our economy has grown back to its long-term trend line within 4-6 years of the bottom of our deepest recessions. In other words, within 4-6 years, our economy is ticking along as if the recession had never happened. And because government revenue is tied closely to the size of the economy that means our fiscal capacity – our ability to raise revenue from current taxes at current rates – is back to where it would have been without a recession.

What that means is that conservative hysteria is mounting over a fiscal squeeze that will go away by itself as the economy recovers to its potential – a fact that conservatives could figure out for themselves.

If that's the case, why the hysteria? The answer is to be found in the tried and true “solutions” to our “deficit crisis” that have been put back on the table. It goes without saying that the draconian cuts that are being promoted are focused on conservatives' pet political peeves. Public employees' wages and pensions. Programs that support the disadvantaged.

And the belt-tightening that's going to have to happen?

Not the kinds of belts that hold up Armani suits, that's for sure. No suggestion that the tiny minority of high-income Canadians whose incomes have stayed in the stratosphere throughout the recession might pay a bit more in taxes. No suggestion that profitable corporations – right now, mostly banks and energy companies – might forego the huge tax cuts they've been gifted by Ottawa and Queen's Park in the interests of addressing the "crisis".

But more to the point, all of these cuts and all of this belt-tightening threatens to derail our economic recovery before it really gets rolling. Far from being the wrong time to address the gaps in the EI program and to address issues of poverty, it is absolutely the right time. Because the additional stimulus from poverty reduction is exactly what we need to help us out of the recession now and make it easier to manage the next one, when it happens.

Ontario does have a fiscal capacity problem. The Harris government's tax cuts have left Ontario short of the revenue it requires to meet the needs of its citizens. And as the economy recovers, we'll have to address that problem.

But right now, the biggest problem we face is not the recession. It is the politically self-serving panic about the fiscal implications of the recession being promoted by conservatives.

Ontario Alternative Budget

The Ontario Alternative Budget is a project of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The Ontario Alternative Budget Working Group is a coalition of labour, social action, community and church groups that have come together to develop budget alternatives for Ontario. Go to: www.policyalternatives.ca/projects/ontario-alternative-budget

A Four Point Plan for Racial Equity

by Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change - www.colourofpoverty.ca

As Ontarians and Canadians honour and embrace our country's rich diversity discrimination, prejudice and racism, and related racial disparities are in fact on the rise, affecting Aboriginal, other ethno-racial, faith-spiritual, cultural as well as other backgrounds, identities, inclinations and heritages.

According to the United Way of Greater Toronto - racialized community members (Aboriginal and people of colour) are at least two to three times more likely to be poor than the rest of the population in Toronto.



The Children's Aid Society of Toronto has documented child poverty becoming ever more "colour-coded" or racialized. In the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area, the LICO-Before Tax (Low Income Cut-Off) rates of child poverty in the year 2000 were roughly:

- one child in ten among European (white) groups;
- one child in five for East Asian groups;
- one child in four for Aboriginal, South Asian, Caribbean, South & Central American groups;
- one child in three for Arab and West Asian groups; and,
- one in two for children of African heritage.

The Ontario parent advocacy group *People for Education* echoed these warning signs as Aboriginal children and those from other racialized communities continue to experience much higher school drop-out or "push-out" rates that are over twice the average, leading to much less than equitable chances to succeed in school, let alone in life.

As these realities come to fuller light in Hamilton, Windsor, Ottawa, London and elsewhere, those who are concentrated at the bottom of our socio-economic ladders in this way can no longer be considered to be "minority" populations. In 2006, Aboriginal or First Peoples together with communities-of-colour, made up 25% of Ontario's population. According to StatsCanada projections this percentage will grow to near 33%, or fully 1/3 of Ontario's population, by the year 2017.

These trends explain why *Colour of Poverty - Colour of Change* believes that all of our governments - Municipal, Provincial-Territorial and Federal - as well as other key institutional actors or players in education, health & elsewhere need to clearly and specifically address these worsening realities so as not to allow these disparities and inequities to grow further. For if these racialized inequities persist and continue to deepen, the social fabric of Ontario will be stretched well beyond the breaking point.

To focus such needed attention on the real character of the growing inequality in the province, *Colour of Poverty - Color of Change* proposes the following "Four Point Plan for Racial Equity":

- 1 Establish an *Equity and Anti-Racism Directorate* to provide for the collection and analysis of ethno-racially and otherwise appropriately disaggregated data across all provincial Ministries and public institutions. In order to effectively respond to any identified inequities and disparities. The Directorate – with a pan-provincial government-wide mandate – would complement this data analysis by providing an ongoing monitoring and program development role for the integrated implementation of comprehensive and inclusive equity and anti-racism policies and practices.
- 2 Establish an *Employment Equity Secretariat* fully mandated and adequately resourced in order to implement a mandatory and comprehensive employment equity program in Ontario.

- 3 Amend the provincial funding formula for publicly-funded elementary-secondary schools by introducing an *Equity in Education Grant* – a redistributive mechanism rooted in a range of relevant equity and inclusion measures and considerations with respect to the full range of under-achieving groups – to more effectively ameliorate Ontario’s growing ethno-racially and otherwise defined learning outcome inequities and disparities.
- 4 Have all Federal, Provincial and Municipal investment strategies and stimulus packages incorporate a set of strong equity objectives and targeted initiatives and outcomes. Federal investments must extend the *Employment Equity Act* by attaching such requirements to all inter-governmental and other financial transfers and allocations. These same principles must also be effectively and consistently applied toward all current and future investments, particularly “green” energy, “green” industry or “green” economy job-creating initiatives.

These modest, low or no cost steps can provide for strategies, plans, budgets and investments that can best reflect Ontarians and Canadians fundamental values of fairness, equity and sustainability.

It takes a village to raise a child

Go to <http://isarc.ca/archives/StandingCommitteeonFinanceandEconomicAffairsJan2610.pdf> to read ISARC’s submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs - January 26, 2010 in London

In from the Margins: A Call to Action to End Poverty - February 25 Toronto

Senator Art Eggleton, Chair of Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, will be speaking on at The Empire Club of Canada, Thursday, February 25, 2010, 12pm, Royal York Hotel, Quebec Room (MM Level). Purchase tickets: \$70/\$60 for members; tables of 10 \$700/\$600 for members at www.empireclub.org or by calling 416.364.2878 (press 0). All inquiries should be directed to info@empireclub.org.

Community Justice Camp - live the change you want to see May 9 - 14

In May, the Anglican Diocese of Niagara is hosting a Community Justice Camp, focused on the theme of community development. The camp will be interactive with learning through immersion experiences with local justice partners.

Go to www.justicecamp.ca for more information and to download a poster.

Our diverse religious traditions have different approaches to how we pray for our politicians and government. This new series explores the question from the perspective of our various religious communities. Our latest response is from a Hindu perspective.

How Do We Pray For Our Politicians and Government? - a Hindu perspective

By Pandit Suraj Persad, Hindu Chaplain, University of Toronto and Hospital for Sick Children - www.hinduchaplaincy.com



From the inception of humanity the Vedas prescribe the performance of Special Rituals (Yagna) for the welfare of the Rulers and Protectors of the Nation. The Rig Veda, which is considered to be the oldest literature of humanity, extols us to pray for the Rulers so that:

Neither enemies nor hypocrites and double-dealers shall bring harm to the Head of State and may that person be free from sin and sorrow. He shall defend and protect us from those who are treacherous and can be injurious (Rig Veda 2.35.5).

Those who govern and protect are called Kshatriyas and it is their duty to enact laws in accordance with the spirit and dictates of the Scriptures in consultation with the religious leaders in the society. It is also their duty to protect and defend the nation and its citizens at any cost.

For Hindus, freedom is their birthright and this freedom shall not be compromised. Hence, it is the ethos of the Vedic peoples to cherish this inherent freedom and preserve it for the rest to emulate and follow. A popular prayer that is found in the Yajur Veda and which has been routinely recited since time immemorial and continues to be used in the daily worship of many individuals belonging to the Hindu tradition contains the following verse:

O Supreme Lord, may brave warriors and statesmen capable of ruling the people be born in our state. Let expert archers and marksmen be born in our state. May there also be born many virtuous women, valorous men, heroic youths and fighters with the will to victory (Yajur Veda 22.22).

It is widely believed that Statesmen and Rulers must possess noble traits. Some of these divine qualities and attributes have been enunciated by Lord Krishna who himself was a Kshatriya.

Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in knowledge and Yoga, almsgiving, control of the senses, sacrifices (yajna), study of the Scriptures, austerity and straightforwardness (Bhagavad Gita 16. 1).

Individuals possessing these qualities are worthy of glory and praise regardless of the religious tradition to which they belong. They will surely uplift the community and the nation and their exemplary stature will also have a great impact in the world.

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