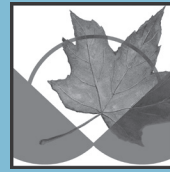


Election 2016 UNSPUN



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MANITOBA OFFICE

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Poverty on the Agenda: an analysis of party platforms

Manitobans rate themselves to be a generous and caring society. When natural disasters strike, we are the first to respond. Manitobans are Canada's most reliable donors to causes both at home and abroad. So how is it that poverty continues to afflict more than 140,000 Manitobans, including 40,000 children? Quite simply, as dedicated volunteers at Manitoba's many food banks and shelters confirm, poverty cannot be solved by charity. It requires determined collective effort through government policy and leadership.

Poverty is social disaster that cuts short more lives than all forms of cancer combined. A child growing up in poverty is likely to die eight years younger than a wealthier Manitoban. Diabetes rates among the lowest income groups are 70 per cent higher. Only one in three children who have been in the care of Child and Family Services is likely to graduate high school. More than three quarters of admissions to Manitoba's correctional system identify as Aboriginal, reflecting a long pattern of colonialism and entrenched poverty that plagues many Indigenous communities.

Too often these stark facts slip into the background of debate as we approach election season. Our electoral system discourages politicians from tackling systemic problems, rewarding those who propose superficial but soundbite-ready solutions. For example, in the 2015 federal election, all political parties

sought to define themselves as the party of the middle class. Top election issues, like health care and the economy, are rarely addressed from the perspective of how they affect people living in poverty.

In this respect, Manitoba may be turning the page. Citizens are increasingly holding governments to account for how they address deep-seated problems like inequality and social exclusion. It is no longer acceptable for our leaders to ignore the racial and class divides that scar our cities. Manitobans are demanding policy solutions that will resolve the root causes of poverty as well as its most immediate effects. Make Poverty History Manitoba launched a campaign last December called K(NO)W Poverty to make sure that poverty remains on the agenda this election.

Party Platforms on Poverty

In 2016, every political party at least has made mention of poverty in its platforms. This is a welcome shift of message from many earlier campaigns. However, the policy proposals announced thus far have varied in their completeness. As Shauna MacKinnon wrote in her UNSPUN piece (Who is Doing What on Poverty Reduction), voters need to ask if the party's plans are comprehensive and include increased income, access to education, decent jobs, housing, child care, health care, recreation etc. As should be expected, each set of policies reflects differing philosophies about poverty and how

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it can be solved. We ask voters can judge for themselves the effectiveness of each proposed approach.

NDP

Greg Selinger's New Democrats go into this campaign with both the advantages and disadvantages of a record in power. They bear the burden of high rates of poverty. The provincial government points out that federal policy, particularly in regards to poverty rates on First Nations Reserves, must bear part of the blame. Even so, by any measure, the ongoing prevalence of poverty in Manitoba is unacceptable and provides ammunition to other parties.

However, the NDP can also point to a record of responsiveness to many community demands. The full implementation of Rent Assist this year raised shelter benefits to 75 percent of median market rent. Manitoba has been a national leader in the construction of social housing with 2,000 new units over the past seven years. The Premier is supportive of the comprehensive approach as outlined in the *View from Here* and the province has implemented a number of the recommendations. The government has also documented its poverty reduction efforts through its legislated All Aboard report, a useful step in tackling poverty.

So far this election, the NDP have addressed many of the policy priorities our coalition has identified, including promising 12,000 child care spaces, increasing the minimum wage, building new social housing, and a commitment to working with the community to set targets and timelines for poverty reduction. Some of these promises, most notably the NDP's child care plan, match closely proposals put forward by Make Poverty History Manitoba. They have committed to both the 12,000 child care spaces asked for by the community as well as the end of minimum \$2 per day fees for the low income Manitobans needing child care. They have also promised to build 300 units per year of social housing, though their start date for this promise comes one year later than expected. The NDP are the only party that have publicly agreed to increase the minimum

wage increases of 50 cents per year, though it is less than the \$15.53 demanded by MPMH. At proposed rates, it will take a decade or more to bring some low wage worker up above the poverty line. One area of concern – the NDP lacks a solid plan to raise the basic living budget for single people living on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA), an amount that has been frozen since 2004. The NDP have instead proposed some targeted programs that would increase the incomes segmented groups including individuals on EIA and further research on a pension-like program for people with disabilities.

PCs

The Progressive Conservatives have rightly decried Manitoba's high child poverty rates and the large number of children in care. They also were early to support of our plan to raise EIA shelter benefits in 2013. Under Brian Pallister, the PCs have sought to soften their party's image and distance itself from the austerity policies it implemented in the 1990s. Pallister has emphasized his working class roots calling himself a "blue-collared Manitoban". How far he is able to change Manitoban's perceptions will depend on the policies he puts forward during the campaign.

Unfortunately, their platform is short on details for how they would tackle poverty if elected. The main plank in their poverty plan so far has been a commitment to raise the personal exemption level for provincial income tax. The current level of basic exemption, set at \$9,134, means that many low income people pay provincial income tax. An increase of \$1,000 would lower taxes by \$9 per month for most Manitobans. However, the lowest income Manitobans living on part-time wages or EIA would be excluded from this tax cut. The PCs have also proposed steeper reductions in taxes for higher income groups. For every \$1,000 increase in the basic exemption, the public purse loses \$78 million dollars in revenue, revenue that could be used to fight poverty. Altogether, the proposal is costly and falls well short of what is needed to lift families out of poverty.

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Pallister has also made a commitment about raising EIA shelter rates to 75 per cent of median market rent. While any commitment to increase EIA is welcome, this proposal is confusing since Rent Assist rates are already set at 75 percent and extends to the working poor as well. It is possible that the PCs are using different calculations, in which case, it would be helpful for them to release further details of their plan, including who increases would apply to and if benefits for non-EIA recipients would be retained.

Over the course of the campaign the PCs have made some further proposals that will benefit low income Manitobans, such a promise to cut ambulance fees. They have acknowledged a comprehensive approach is needed and suggested a willingness to work with poverty activists if elected. They have also promised to maintain some existing policies, such as Rent Assist, for those on EIA and the working poor and to not sell off social housing to the private sector. While these commitments are welcome, Make Poverty History Manitoba is still waiting for specific commitments regarding the six policy priorities we have identified.

Liberals

The Manitoba Liberals under leader Rana Bohkari have put forward several policies related to poverty. Rent control, housing and food costs in the North, and a proposed basic income pilot program have all been subjects of announcements in recent months. While the attention to poverty concerns is appreciated, the Liberals suite of policies lacks attention to a comprehensive approach that will be required for its elimination.

Some policy proposals, such as a \$25 million increase in funding for Northern food security are based on evidence and community support, others are ill-thought and do not reflect priorities that have been identified in by people living in poverty. For example, Bohkari has proposed a two-year freeze on all rent increases, despite concerns that such a policy could slow down needed rental construction or speed up condo conversion. Other policies such as a proposed pilot on basic income will require

further details to properly assess. Much would depend on the design of the pilot, and if there is commitment to proceed to implementation is results are successful.

Greens

The Green Party have made poverty reduction through minimum income a central plank in their campaign. The Greens have released a detailed proposal for a minimum income program which is worth analysis. The plan to be delivered tax system would see direct transfers from high and mid income households to those with low incomes. Payments would range from under \$80 per month for single adults on EIA to up to \$500 per month for some low income families not on EIA. This would be a substantial transformation of the tax system, costing \$1.4 billion dollars per year according to their calculations. The Greens calculate this would reduce the poverty rates by 45 percent within two years of implementation.

The viability of the program would require further research. Under the Green's proposal, mid to upper income families would pay between \$770 and \$1,100 per year annually on their tax bills. Notably the funding for the Green's minimum income program is generated from personal tax revenue not business or corporate taxes, signaling that it is households, not businesses and the corporate sector who should pay for ending poverty. Given resistance the NDP faced to a sales tax increase in 2013 that was less than one quarter this the size of this proposal, implementation would be challenging. With proper consultation, and a clear explanation of the return to everyone of the benefits from reduced poverty, it is possible that Manitobans could support the substantial investments envisioned.

There are however, concerns that the proposal is not sufficiently progressive, with businesses and upper income households not paying a fair share. Ultimately Federal involvement would be needed, especially since a disproportionate share of the poverty in Manitoba is suffered by First Nations people on reserve communities whose incomes are dependent on fed-

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eral agreements. The Greens deserve credit for developing the first concrete proposal for a minimum income plan. This will provide a starting point for more substantive discussion of how and whether minimum income could be implemented at a provincial level in Manitoba.

Increasing income is an important component to alleviating poverty, however it is not a silver bullet. Public investment in services such as accessible child care, public housing, community-based mental health programs are also important. The Greens are not sufficiently looking beyond Mincome, which was piloted in a rural community in the 1970s. Reducing and ultimately eliminating poverty requires access to public services, which require public capital and operating grants to function.

What to look for in party platforms

Make Poverty History Manitoba is focused on the need for a comprehensive approach to ending poverty. Last year, two of our leading partners, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Canadian Community Economic Development Network released a plan called the *View from Here* which outlined 49 recommendations for poverty reduction. The plan was based on extensive consultations with community organizations, policy experts and people living in poverty and endorsed by over 100 groups including Make Poverty History Manitoba. Based on this plan, our coalition prioritized six key areas we are looking for progress on in this election.

1. Targets and Timelines: Parties should develop a comprehensive poverty reduction plan including targets and timelines to reduce poverty.
2. Minimum Wage: Raise the minimum wage to a poverty line wage of \$15.53 per hour. This is based on the level needed to raise a single parent family with one child above the poverty line.
3. Social Housing: Build at least 300 new social housing units annually for five years, while maintaining existing stock.

4. Welfare Rate: Double the basic needs allowance for Employment and Income Assistance recipients. The current basic needs allowance, which covers everything except rent, provides only \$4 per day for food, far below what is needed for a healthy diet.

5. Child Care: Create at least 12,000 subsidized childcare spaces with priority in low-income neighbourhoods and eliminate all fees for the lowest income Manitobans.

6. Mental Health: Double the funding allotted to community-based mental health services for low income Manitobans.

These priorities have been identified as the most urgent areas on which progress is needed during the term of the next government. Although these policies will not in themselves end poverty, they are the ones that will make the most difference in reducing both its depth and breadth. Most importantly, they are areas where success can be made immediately. Long-term a comprehensive approach will be needed.

What you can do

Make Poverty History Manitoba is asking all Manitobans to make this election an election about poverty. Get informed about poverty in Manitoba and the proposals we have developed. Ask your candidates about what their plans are. On April 19, vote no to poverty.

Josh Brandon is the Chair of Make Poverty History Manitoba and a Community Animator at the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.

UNSPUN is the 2016 provincial election commentary from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba

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