



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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Random Acts of Kindness Not Enough to Fight Inequality

It's noteworthy how much media attention Mr. Doubledee's random act of kindness is receiving. He and Mayor Katz were in New York this Saturday to appear on CBS TV. Doubledee, a Winnipeg Transit driver, told the story of how he stopped his bus and got out to give a homeless, barefoot man his shoes. The passengers on his bus were brought to tears. Winnipeggers are touched and inspired. Mr. Katz is proud to be his mayor.

Kristian Doubledee, a modest man, did not help the homeless man because he wanted to be a hero, as Mr. Katz called him. He clearly acted out of a desire to help someone in need. Touching as his deed is, Mr. Doubledee said something that should grab our attention more than that one action: he said that he hopes the anonymous homeless man will now receive as much attention as he's been getting. And that sentiment brings us to the crux of the matter.

What kind of attention should the marginalized receive? If we accept that something needs to be done (and judging by the international attention this story is receiving, many people do) how can we actually make a difference? Random acts of kindness, nice as they are, will not begin to deal with the complex array of problems facing most marginalized people.

As we contemplate possible strategies, it is instructive to remember that Canada, Manitoba included, was a more equal place forty years ago. Food banks were unheard of - because they weren't needed; homelessness was relatively rare; childhood poverty was less severe; the middle class was larger,

with more people making decent wages. What happened? How did conditions deteriorate so? Why do we seem so helpless in the face of worsening social conditions?

We feel so helpless because the social contract that used to provide us with decent jobs that kept many people out of poverty, and comprehensive social services to help those who were poor, has been replaced with a neo-liberal agenda. Neo-liberalism claims that individuals are solely responsible for their own fate; that a free, unregulated market is the most efficient way to distribute scarce resources; and, most incredibly, that we all come into this world with access to the same opportunities. If we hear this discourse enough (and the media makes sure we do) we feel paralyzed in the face of suffering and need, even though many of us feel a sense of responsibility and shame for allowing such suffering in the midst of plenty.

We are an increasingly rich society, but since the inception of neo-liberalism wealth is much more unevenly distributed; the top 1 per cent receive increasingly fantastic portions of wealth and income. Neo-liberal policies have made sure that income flows to the very top - through income tax cuts for the rich and corporations, and easier access to tax havens. But it hasn't just been the introduction of more regressive tax policy that has changed the landscape. Globalization means we have to compete with less regulated jurisdictions where

there is an alternative.

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workers are treated shamefully and this competition has allowed governments, encouraged by business lobby groups, to launch a vicious attack on the labour movement and government run programs like Employment Insurance. Finally, a growing precarious work environment filled with low-paying, part-time jobs with no benefits makes sure that many more workers than before are unable to join or remain in the middle-class.

Neo-liberalism has delivered society a powerful double punch: it has decimated our progressive tax system and restructured our labour market to the disadvantage of workers. So more Canadians are pushed to the margins – and beyond – and shrinking government revenues means there are fewer social services to help them. At the same time, we're encouraged to donate to charity to appease our natural tendency to want to help those who have fallen through the ever-widening cracks.

That we have become a much more unequal society is indisputable. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, both nationally and in Manitoba, has documented the changes in Canada. Linda McQuaig and Neil Brooks document the shocking changes in wealth and income distribution in their book *The Trouble with Billionaires*. Canada's increasing inequality has been confirmed by the OECD. Eminent economists like Joseph Stiglitz document the same trend in the US. All these studies also explain why it doesn't have to be this way and how we can turn things around. They also point out how we have to make improvements if we are to avoid major societal unrest in the near future.

But it isn't going to be easy. We have to replace this powerful but corrosive neo-liberal narrative with a new one – one that affirms the humanity of building equal societies. We can begin by drawing on the findings from *The Spirit Level*, Wilkinson and Pickett's groundbreaking work showing that all members of society benefit from more equality, and how more equal societies out perform unequal societies on all manner

of social indicators. We can take heart from the authors' observation that 90 per cent of Americans would rather see income distributed as it is in Sweden, one of the most equal societies, as opposed to the US, one of, if not the most unequal. CCPA polling has produced similar results in Canada: Canadians want a more equal society.

Our challenge is to provide a narrative that allows people to abandon the twisted logic of the free market and inspire them to pressure politicians to do the same. No number of random acts of kindness can ameliorate the growing inequality threatening us today. We need a societal response; a collective, sustained and forceful act of kindness. Making politicians understand that we want an end to: tax cuts for the rich and corporations; lousy jobs; and, cuts to social services would constitute a collective act of effective kindness. If enough of us deliver this message, we'll win back a more equal society.

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