

## **Cruel cutbacks: Social policy of the Tories will hurt Ontario's most vulnerable citizens**

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### Note

Listening to the recent announcement of expenditure cutbacks by the Ontario Tories, one wonders how many citizens unwittingly voted for social policies that will increase inequality by hurting women, children, people with disabilities and the poor.

Yet this is exactly what these cutbacks introduced by the newly elected government will mean.

Many have argued that the initiatives of this Conservative administration are being fiscally driven, and not policy driven. However, there is a deeper policy agenda that needs to be understood. Let's look at some of the assumptions and values within an historical context.

Over the last 50 years, social policy has been used as an instrument to create more equality. The Canada Health Act, which gave us medicare, is a universal policy that creates more equal access to medical services and supports for all citizens. Unemployment Insurance is another universal policy that is available to all workers who become unemployed or lose their jobs.

Other social policies that can be considered instruments of equality are more directed to particular populations and are designed to enhance their quality of life and access to goods and resources. Examples would include welfare policy, which provides money to individuals who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to work. Another example would be non-profit housing, which recognizes that the private housing market after the war did a very poor job of making low-cost housing available to poor people.

Despite numerous flaws, one of the great gains in social policy in the 20th century in most European countries and Canada has been the increase in social policies that play a compassionate role in enhancing equality. The news from Ernie Eves, the province's treasurer, makes us realize that our current leaders have no grasp or interest in equality. In fact, in many ways, they would like us to return to the 18th century and earlier when the British Poor Laws were enacted. Under those laws, policies and programs were instituted for the deserving poor, with a separate set of programs for the undeserving poor. But who is to say who is deserving?

Obviously for this government, people who require social assistance are seen to be undeserving. What does elimination of the Advocacy Commission and Employment Equity say about their view of people with disabilities?

This Ontario Conservative government is not just interested in creating a leaner, more efficient government. All signs point to the fact that they want the wealthy to gain from their stay in power. To appease us they emphasize that if corporations are less constrained the benefits will "trickle down" to the rest of us.

As with their understanding of social policy, they do not base this on any research or analysis, only on ideology. The trickle-down theory is pure bunk, of course, as demonstrated more recently by the eight years of former U.S. president Ronald Reagan. During this time the gap between rich and poor widened considerably and the U.S. national debt grew out of control. And the same will happen in Ontario if the cutbacks continue and the promised tax reductions occur.

The pain of deficit reduction will be felt unequally by Ontarians. Consider just two of the assumptions of this new government and some of the likely consequences:

Assumption: Housing can be more effectively provided by the private sector.

Expected results: Increased number of slum landlords, more inadequate housing, increased number of street people and decreased ability of poor people to take responsibility for their own housing.

Assumption: People on social assistance can live adequately on incomes that are far below the poverty line established by Ottawa.

Expected Results: Increased health risks (and health costs) to adults and children who live in poverty as a result of poor nutrition and increased stress.

For the first time in decades in this province, social policy as an instrument of equality is on hold. I believe most citizens of Ontario would want it otherwise. Time will show the impact of this government's policies on the lives of our most vulnerable citizens. What voices will be heard against this inequality?

John Lord of Kitchener, an author and social research consultant, was a founder and co-ordinator for 10 years of the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.

**[Illustration]**

Caption: Eves is oblivious to inequality. John Lord