

## Claire Trevena Talk at Board Voice Conference December 2, 2011

I talk to you today, little more than a week after Campaign 2000 released its latest report on child poverty, and First Call issued the poverty report card. We are 11 years overdue in eradicating child poverty and once again BC's record is, as I said in the Legislature last week, shameful. We are worst in Canada. We know children are going to school hungry, children are living in sub standard housing or in motel rooms, and children are reliant on food banks. And as everyone in this room knows, child poverty reflects family poverty: children are not alone in their poverty – they have one or two parents; they often have siblings. We perhaps use child poverty as the symbol for how bad the situation really is.

Or perhaps there is that underlying moral judgement which has been growing this last decade that there are the deserving and undeserving poor – children fall into the first category “they can't help it”. but adults should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, get out and find a job, provide for their families.

The reality of that argument is undermined by last week's statistics which show that almost half of those in poverty – 48 percent – are living with parents who are working full time. That is a frightening reflection of our society; low wages, high cost of living, exorbitant cost of housing. Poverty and hunger is the result. Add to that mix those who are trying to survive on welfare and I am surprised we don't have a revolution in the making.

Now tomorrow I know you have the Minister of Children and Families addressing you; I am what in some jurisdictions is called her shadow. So I will foreshadow some of what she may express to you when talking about poverty: she will rightly say that it is not a good thing. She will suggest the solution is for communities to work on community and regional anti poverty plans; she will say that the government's jobs plan is also important because having a job is the best solution to poverty.

In BC I am the *critic* for children and families – and so will critique these arguments. Firstly, that jobs solve poverty. Of course we want people to be working, to be earning an income and supporting their families. But the statistics show that is not enough: as I mentioned, 48 percent of the kids are from families who are working; and working families are being further squeezed faced with changes in childcare subsidy cut offs; with lack of access to rent subsidies; working families rely on food banks.

And I would suggest the regional poverty reduction being pushed by this minister is simply the opportunity to down load the problem to communities, and inevitably to community social services.

The organisations which you represent have faced this downloading along with instability in funding for several years. As Boards you have seen the fight for dollars, as your organisations apply for each grant that comes around, work on projects rather than programmes, and look to

lotteries for those extra dollars. And that is one of the saddest and most ironic aspects of the last ten years – organisations like yours are forced to rely on money which comes primarily from the poorest in our society, and from those who are addicted; those who hope their life will change through gaming. In fact those people that your services in the end often support.

There is no question that the community social service sector needs stable funding. If we are serious about sustainable communities, and supporting the children and families in our towns and cities we have to ensure that money is there to provide long term programming.

The sexy items, to use a journalistic term, in the social portfolio for governments are always health care and education. They get the profile and proportionally healthcare at least gets the dollars. And they should get money. A civil society in our culture works best with an educated populace; and people have every right to access public healthcare. It's just and in societal terms it is cost efficient.

However, unless people have clean, safe housing and have an income greater than one which barely meets basic needs they are neither going to benefit fully from education nor are they likely to be healthy. In basic terms, cold, hungry and tired kids don't learn to the best of their ability and they are likely to be susceptible to illness. And that is the best case scenario; we all know the other problems that poverty can inflict on a family: alcohol or drug addiction, violence or abuse. (These are not symptoms only of poverty but poverty can trigger them).

A government must be willing to tackle poverty and to improve the social determinants of health. To

improve the communities in which we live, we should also be putting public money into programmes which improve people's quality of life – whether it is a healthy babies programme, a violence against women programme or a teen drop-in for street entrenched youth. We need to work together to break the generational cycle of poverty and create a foundation on which everyone in our society has the opportunity to thrive.

You will hear from the minister that “one size doesn't fit all”; and no, it doesn't. But unless there is a concerted effort to reduce poverty, tackle inequality, across the board, we are making an insignificant and unstable difference. I cite an example quoted by one community leader talking about how her jurisdiction tried to lighten the load on poor families by offering free entrance to activities at the rec centre – but then realised people weren't taking up the offer, because they could not afford the bus fare to get to there.

Adrian Dix has made it clear from the outset of his leadership that dealing with inequality is a priority. Without tackling the growing divide our society, our communities will not thrive. I would say we have a moral imperative to tackle poverty. At the end of the last week we again tabled a Poverty Reduction Bill, and continue to call on the government to adopt it. Nearly all other jurisdictions in Canada; Alison Redford says she is now developing one for Alberta which leaves only BC and Saskatchewan without such a government level effort.

I accept a piece of legislation is not a magic wand: it will not make everything right overnight. But it will provide a concerted focus; it will provide energy and initiative; it will put a minister in place and mandate the government to act rather than expect the private sector to come and solve society's ills; I think we have seen that approach does not work..

We are opposition. It is – particularly in BC – highly unlikely that the government will adopt *our* plan. But it is our job as her majesty's loyal opposition to highlight the defects in government policy. Other voices are coming out and saying it is time to act among them the Representative for Children and Youth who has been demanding a *province wide* poverty reduction strategy.

Likewise it is up to civil society to make their voice – your voice – heard.

Giving voice, joining together to demand change.

We have been in opposition for six years; but it was through a vociferous opposition (when Adrian was the critic for children and families) that we got a child and youth representative. It is through vociferous opposition that the government has finally acknowledged there are problems with CLBC– although if the minister could have sat in my office on Monday and heard the sad painful stories from families involved with CLBC she might have been encouraged to act on those problems: the 75 year old mother who is running out of energy and options for her daughter; the mother who as soon as she'd filled in the requisite paperwork for her 25 year old daughter, was told that her file may as well be closed immediately because there's no money; the mom whose daughter, with spina bifida and an IQ of – 74 – who gave into tears.

We are a wealthy province: we have an abundance of natural resources, a base of crown – public – lands, and an educated society. It doesn't have to be this way; it shouldn't be this way.

The traditional way of funding public services is through taxes. Adrian Dix has committed to roll back the corporate tax cuts to 2008 levels. He's also committed to a tax on financial institutions. And I think it is incumbent on anyone who believes in public services, who believes in programmes to help the most vulnerable in our society, to start to think about –and talk about – taxes as positive and as beneficial. It's what provides the public services we can and should expect.

Unfortunately we have had thirty years (not just the last decade – this goes back to Thatcher, Reagan and Milton Friedman) where taxation is spoken of as an anathema. While south of the border, Warren Buffett is starting to argue for increasing tax rates, we have no similar voice here. But taxes are what pay for societal well being – they pay for our foundations and our stability.

We have seen over the last ten years the impact of massive tax cuts; it does not mean people have more choice – it means people have fewer services; it means the organisations you work with have to do more with less. The private sector does not fill the gap; it never has done. We can look back easily over our history – whether it is healthcare, welfare, or education. We need public services funded through the public purse. Without it, the levels of child poverty – of poverty -- will simply keep on growing.

Maybe it is the time of year, maybe my British heritage, but I am reminded of A Christmas Carol – the Second of the Three Spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Present. Hiding among his rich fur lined robes, with the backdrop of a roaring fire and plenty of food are two waifs.

“They are Man’s,” said the Spirit, looking down upon them. “and they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance, This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom unless the writing be erased.”

That was written in 1843. And yet today we see wilful ignorance of want and hardship. Surely, almost two hundred years later in 2012 we can do better. We have to – for all our sakes.

Thank you.