

Poverty – 2011 Version

New Brunswick poverty beware, you're under close surveillance! In the past, the Minister of Social Development, an elected minister, was responsible for the fight against poverty, but that is no longer the case! It seems there is a better solution. Shawn Graham, backed by the conservative party at the time, decided to modify the structure for an innovative approach. With our public funds, we created an entirely new corporation, namely the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation. However, in 2009 and 2010, the meagre 2% rate increases to social welfare were cancelled. Was the budget of this new corporation financed with funds intended for social assistance recipients?

In order to be better equipped to fight poverty, the Crown corporation established a permanent secretariat with an Executive Director, whose salary could reach up to \$103,000 in addition to certain benefits, a Communications Officer, a Provincial Coordinator, Regional Officers, Secretaries, etc. It is as if expenses are irrelevant when it comes to conquering the monster that is poverty!

Given that poverty had infiltrated every region of the province, we needed to establish regional agencies to monitor its spread and be able to intervene in a timely and targeted manner. The solution: gather four partners – community, corporate, government, and citizens. Provide them with training (\$250,000), grant them an operational budget (\$750,000), and voilà! We go to war against poverty well equipped.

In five years, will poverty be resolved? No, on the contrary! We are currently witnesses to a decision stating that instead of the government taking on the important task of eradicating poverty, it is handing it over to a Crown corporation. Henceforth, service delivery of this Crown corporation will be done through community integration networks.

Decision making and social responsibility will be pushed even further away from elected officials of the Legislative Assembly. Community integration networks will become the means by which we will access services such as job integration, literacy mentoring, public transit, community economic development, social enterprises, and housing prioritization.

Allocation of public services to these new networks has massive repercussions and raises important questions. We are aware rural areas do not have access to the same community services as cities like Saint John, Fredericton, and Moncton. How is the imbalance of the number and quality of services provided by community networks in rural areas, in comparison to urban centres, to be addressed?

In regards to non-government services, we have all encountered difficulties to be served in our language of choice. If services provided to people living in poverty

are handed over to the community sector, how will we ensure service in our language of choice when we know that, currently, this sector is unable to do so? Incidentally, it is not certain the new Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation will be subject to the Official Languages Act.

We are all aware political games are played at local and regional levels. Community integration networks will have to submit budgets in order to be granted operating funds as well as for projects. Imagine the political lobbying to obtain those funds! Imagine the financial quarrel between the twelve community integration networks! We know the community sector is currently unable to meet the demand of numerous services. Adding to its responsibilities will, in no way, improve the situation and it is the people living in poverty who will suffer from it.

What do private companies bring to the fight against poverty? They are generally against measures that can reduce poverty such as increasing minimum wage, increasing welfare rates, pay equity or even a public child care system. Does the private sector wish to influence social politics? Is it trying to enhance its image? Is it looking to replace the government with the delivery of public services?

For the final issue, we look at transparency and responsibility. When services are rendered to the population by public agencies and civil servants, the public has access to annual activity reports, salaries are reported, and administrative as well as financial practices are scrutinized. Such is not always the case when non-profit community groups, who are responsible for administering these programs, are involved.

Poverty – 2011 Version, recommends an entirely new structure, a new budget, and new services. But, in all of this, where are the 100,000 people living below the poverty line? In fact, there are thousands of people earning low wages, 40,000 children and adults relying on welfare, and seniors receiving the guaranteed annual supplement. Are we dealing with poverty under close surveillance or is poverty being used as a new instrument for regional economic development?

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