

M. Higgs proposals will not reduce poverty.

In his state of the province address, Premier Blaine Higgs took up the issue of social assistance, briefly mentioned in his electoral platform and in his throne speech. In this speech, we begin to better understand his intentions.

In this state of the province speech, Mr. Higgs reiterated the need to reform social assistance, but with no mention of the poverty reduction plan, even though it was part of his throne speech. He is more concerned about the labour shortage in certain sectors of the economy. There is no mention of providing for learning opportunities for people on social assistance, as mentioned in the electoral platform. No reference is made as to the launching of a discussion on models enabling more short-term help to more recent social assistance recipients, as mentioned in the throne speech. According to Blaine Higgs, we must find ways to get social assistance recipients back to work. And to do so, his government hopes to help them by taking care of transportation, child care, and even housing.

First of all, we are certainly not against the fact that the government must help citizens on social assistance find employment. This is already taking place through different education programs, workforce re-entry, extension of the health card for three years, helping with child care and housing costs, etc. Enhancing these programs can only prove positive.

Mr. Higgs seems to think that an individual can overcome poverty automatically by getting a job. This is not necessarily the case. In fact, if individuals have well-paying jobs, their salary will help them live above the poverty line and meet their needs, but when they have a minimum wage job, they cannot live adequately. The Common Front for Social Justice has published a study on net income and expenditures in four categories of minimum wage workers; at the end of the year, they all had a deficit based on their expenditures. Therefore, a job will not guarantee a life free from poverty.

In fact, the great majority of social assistance recipients are not able to work, whether because they lack qualifications, education, are critical ill, have physical or mental problems, etc. They are permanently unemployable, and as a society, we must accept this situation and stop harassing them.

On the other hand, Mr. Higgs is saying that we have become too tolerant of citizens who depend on social assistance over several years to survive. We should now scrutinize the lives of these recipients to find out how long they have been on social assistance and, according to an arbitrary measure, let's say a minimum of two to five years, become intolerant towards them. To want to stir up intolerance towards full-fledged citizens who unfortunately have to live in poverty and who are at the mercy of our social net is shameful!

Another statement from the speech that makes you wonder is saying that we are giving too much to certain recipients, and that it prevents us from helping those who absolutely cannot work because of a disability. In what way should we take this statement? Should we now slash the incomes in one category of recipients and transfer this money to another category? Instead of addressing the problem, Mr. Higgs wants to divide different categories of recipients, stipulating that one category is more deserving than another.

For your information, Mr. Premier, almost one-third of all social assistance recipients have not had an increase in their basic rate since 2010, and the others since 2014. They have all lost an important portion of their buying power because of inflation and the increase in prices for basic needs.

In reality, thousands of men, women, and children are already subjected to constant monitoring by the Department.

In reality, all are victims of prejudiced attitudes in the general population.

Mr. Higgs says he wants to reform social assistance, but his speech is not reassuring. What we need here in New Brunswick is a frank and open discussion on poverty and on ways to reduce it. The review process for the poverty reduction plan for the next five years is set to begin, and we believe this to be an ideal opportunity to lead a broad reflection on tools and necessary actions to be taken to reduce poverty and the stigma surrounding it.

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