

Letter to the Editor
Canadians just don't get it
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People are poor because they're lazy and have lower moral values. At least that's what many in our country think.

Shockingly, many also think people who live in poverty still have it pretty good and if they really wanted to work they could find a job. And that a family of four could get by on \$10-30,000 a year or less.

If that's how we view the poor among us it's not surprising little has been done to change the status quo. A recent Salvation Army study highlights one very important fact about Canadians—when it comes to understanding the true realities of poverty, we just don't get it.

Poverty is being judged every time you buy a two-litre bottle of soda for 99 cents rather than two litres of milk for \$3.50. Poverty is being offered work for \$200 a month and having to turn it down because your income assistance will be reduced accordingly, despite the fact your living expenses will go up if you take the job (e.g. child care and bus fare). Poverty is hiding the ways you try to save money, because if you are successful you are judged to be manipulating the support system and risk being cut off.

Poverty is the child who hopes they get invited to a friend's house so they won't go to bed hungry. It's the family that has a can of beans for supper five days in a row because it's the only thing in their cupboard. It's the couple who stays up until early morning arguing about whether they should pay their electric bill, pay the rent or buy food. Poverty is losing your dignity, losing your confidence and your hope, and being judged for every decision you make.

Many Nova Scotians are dealing with these realities, and often it's behind closed doors. Perhaps that's why as Canadians, we are so naïve to their struggles—because they aren't always staring us in the face. And even when they are, it's clear we are quick to judge and reluctant to challenge our own misconceptions.

In November 2009, parliament unanimously passed a motion to end poverty and then just over a year later the Harper Government demonstrated utter disregard for the issue by dismissing the poverty reduction plan put forward by the human resources standing committee of the House of Commons. Almost 900,000 Canadians visit a food bank each month (HungerCount 2010). We have multi-party agreement that poverty needs to be addressed; we have multi-party Senate reports providing specific recommendations; we have politicians of all stripes acknowledging that poverty costs approximately \$7.5 billion every year in healthcare costs alone and between \$8 billion and \$13 billion in lost productivity. Perhaps the only thing missing is loud, unequivocal support for tangible change from the Canadian people.

In order to stand passionately behind these recommendations and demand action, Canadians must first commit to educating themselves on the issues. When the misconceptions of poverty are replaced with a collective understanding we can speak together in a strong, clear voice that will be impossible to ignore.

Together we need to challenge our provincial government to follow through on their commitment in the 2010 Throne Speech to introduce major transformation of the Employment Support and Income Assistance program.

Together we need to make sure the inclusion of a federal poverty reduction plan is a prerequisite for federal budget support, and vote for the party that includes poverty reduction as part of their election platform. All parties have acknowledged the need to end poverty and now they need to be held accountable for their rhetoric.

Although many of the results of the Salvation Army study were disappointing, they also highlighted one thing we already knew—that Canadians care. Ninety six per cent of us believe that everyone deserves a sense of dignity.

It's time to put that sentiment into action.