



# DEBATES OF THE SENATE

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## **THE SENATE**

**MOTION TO ENCOURAGE THE GOVERNMENT TO EVALUATE  
THE COST AND IMPACT OF IMPLEMENTING A  
NATIONAL BASIC INCOME PROGRAM—  
MOTION IN AMENDMENT—DEBATE SUSPENDED**

Speech by:

The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Tuesday, May 9, 2017

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#### MOTION TO ENCOURAGE THE GOVERNMENT TO EVALUATE THE COST AND IMPACT OF IMPLEMENTING A NATIONAL BASIC INCOME PROGRAM—MOTION IN AMENDMENT— DEBATE SUSPENDED

**Hon. Patricia Bovey:** We are all better off when we are all better off. Those words from *The Gardens of Democracy*, so simple yet complex, became the mantra of my late husband. It is true. We are all better off in every aspect of life when we are all better off. What do we need to do for every dimension of society to be better off?

The answer is layered and involved. Poverty must be substituted with human dignity. Our citizens need to be fulfilled, contributing members of society, able to care for themselves and their families with pride and self-confidence. All must have the ability and means to make their own decisions according to their circumstances, needs and wants.

Senators, I add my voice to support Motion No. 51 and the call for a basic income program. I salute Senator Eggleton for his initiative and work on poverty issues and his strong voice for those who have none.

Building on Manitoba's 1970s Dauphin Mincom pilot project, we learned last week that the Government of Ontario will launch a Mincom project in Lindsay, Hamilton and Thunder Bay. My guess is that the results will likely be similar. Like projects are now running in various parts of the world. Canadian and international research on poverty is compelling, with concerns articulated by London's Citizens' Economic Council:

How can citizens on lower incomes get a fair deal? . . . life costs more if you're poor.

Neil Richmond, co-founder of OneSquin, commented:

Gender inequality compounds poverty, and small purchasing decisions have the power to change the world.

Last September, U.K.'s Royal Society of the Arts' Inclusive Growth Commission published their interim report, *Growing Together*, highlighting a conclusive early finding, the need for:

. . . economic and social policy to move closely together at all levels of government, as in Britain for the first time more than 50% of people living in poverty are in work —

This underlines the importance of investment that builds social infrastructure on the same scale as physical infrastructure.

Canadian figures are similar. The majority of those in poverty are in work, precarious work, short term, low-paying contracts and sporadic seasonal work. Another concerning societal shift is the widening gap between rich and poor.

Ten years ago, Valerie Tarasuk, of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine, noted Canada has no anti-poverty strategy when she wrote:

There is precious little indication of political interest in addressing the very serious problems of poverty that underpin hunger and food insecurity in our country . . . Welfare incomes continue to be set at levels well below basic costs of living in most jurisdictions, and low-income families . . . are facing increasing hardships . . . .

Are we any better off 10 years later? Few disagree that everyone deserves an adequate standard of living. I was surprised to learn that \$37,500 is still considered the basic annual baseline income for a family of four, despite the poverty line being \$40,000. Some metrics set \$50,000 as a baseline. LIM, the low-income measure, includes income, basic needs of food, housing, clothing, education and entertainment. We know the current crisis of housing costs in Canada's large cities and the myriad issues in the North — housing, insulation, water, the price of food — with milk costing more than soft drinks and alcohol.

So, colleagues, I ask: What would your priority be as a family of four living on \$37,500 or even \$50,000? Your rent or mortgage, food, your children's school books, seeing the dentist, taking medications as prescribed, clothes for your growing children or the occasional movie? How would you juggle those core necessities? How do we create a fair playing field when our regional situations, North to South, large city to rural, are so different?

"Living on the Edge: Taking a Look at Poverty" is a Winnipeg United Way poverty simulation tour. With a facilitator, groups walk a metaphorical mile in the lives of Winnipeggers experiencing poverty and face the issues they deal with, the expected and the unexpected.

Recently, I met with those involved over many years in Manitoba's food banks and social agencies and heard their stories, concerns and dedication to turning these tides.

In the 1970s Dauphin Mincom project, incomes were topped up to a minimum guaranteed level. Two findings particularly resonated with me.

Health costs, one of the most expensive issues governments face, were reduced by 8.5 per cent, with an almost 10 per cent reduction in hospitalization. High school completion rose from 80 per cent to 100 per cent, or, put another way, the dropout rate fell from 20 per cent to 0 per cent. Both gains were lost when the study was truncated. What worked? Why were the gains not sustained?

The self-esteem and self-confidence garnered by ensuring a minimum income and not facing penalties if they got a job were critically important. Recipients felt respected, able to make their decisions and plan their expenses, without worrying each month whether they would be able to cover rent, food, medications, child care or transportation.

Senators, we all know that the sense of feeling human and pride, self-reliance and self-confidence are critically necessary for personal well-being.

Let me tell you the story of Big Bill. He had had a good career, but circumstances changed, forcing him to live marginally. Homeless, he dumpster dove for food. When found, he was virtually inarticulate. He then became a regular user of Winnipeg Harvest, always bringing his belongings with him. Personal cleanliness was an issue. No one commented. His situation was well understood. He was fed at Harvest and given work to do. With proper nutrition, his intelligence became apparent. One day, he arrived without his stuff. He had a place to live, a room in a Main Street hotel. His sense of well-being grew until he was a victim of theft and again brought everything with him.

But one day, he arrived well-dressed and clean. Staff were surprised. Compliments reigned. His response? "I just had my birthday. I turned 65. I get OAS. Now I feel like a citizen, as good as everyone else." Thereafter, he voted and took part in normal daily life. That security of basic income was transformational.

Another story involves a gang member from a Winnipeg inner-city reservation, a client of Winnipeg's Social Planning Council. Substance dependent and involved in crime, he had been in and out of prison. With his wife's sudden death, this now single father of four was determined not to return to prison. His struggle to stay clean was tough. He succeeded. A job was a significant factor, as was the much-needed moral support from others. That success, with its financial security, gave him pride and self-esteem.

In 2013, 1,334,930 children lived in poverty, almost one of every five in Canada. More than one third of children in poverty lived in a household with at least one family member employed full time. One in seven Canadians using homeless shelters is a child. We know those situations lead to higher rates of mental and physical health issues.

The report the *Impact of Poverty on the Current and Future Health Status of Children* noted:

Child poverty in Canada is a significant public health concern. Because child development during the early years lays the foundation for later health and development, children must be given the best possible start in life. Family income is a key determinant of healthy child development. . . . On average, children living in low-income families or neighbourhoods have poorer health outcomes. Furthermore, poverty affects children's health not only when they are young, but also later in their lives as adults.

Children deserve nutritious food. One cannot learn on an empty stomach.

These challenges affect us all — teachers working with children in poverty, health care workers, social agencies, policing agencies and more. Effecting change will entail full societal collaboration between governments, charities, schools, the private sector and community centres. We must find collective constructive ways to empower and enable sustained personal and community improvements. There is not one fix to this huge problem, but a job and guaranteed minimum income, not handouts, have already proven to be first critical steps. People do want to work. We all want to be self-sufficient and make our own decisions.

In pondering these imponderables, I equate basic income to equal access to all opportunities — food, housing, water, education, health and jobs.

Subsidized child care is absolutely essential for women to work. Access to education and training to gain necessary skills is imperative. Access to public transport is vital to get people to work.

Those with disabilities have added challenges. I commend grocery store and bank initiatives to hire and support financial investment programs for young adults with disabilities. A friend of my daughter has benefited from both. In her late 30s, she realizes that given her medical condition, she will never be able to work full time, and that will be low income. Nonetheless, she is already planning for retirement, setting aside as much as she can. Her bank matches her savings and she meets regularly with a financial counsellor they provide.

We all agree that education is the key to reconciliation. I was struck several years ago to learn of three northern Manitoba families who pooled resources to buy a townhouse in Winnipeg for their children while they attended university. Each parent took every sixth week off work to be parent in residence, ensuring a safe and healthy home atmosphere for their youth. I applaud that commitment to the importance of education and a good living experience. Those young people have all been able to take their place within their professions.

You have heard me talk of my graduate student from Ghana. Since arriving in Winnipeg last fall, he has volunteered weekly at the university's food bank. He sent me his impressions:

I was thrilled with the thoughtful idea of making food available so that those that need help with food will have access to it. I couldn't help but also imagine the number of lives such an exercise will touch in other parts of the world. Food is a basic need which should be available to everyone no matter the social class.

Volunteering at the foodbank is one of the best things I enjoy doing. It is interesting to observe how clients interact and share ideas among themselves. Most of these clients have amazing potential and ideas but lack the means (wealth) to implement them. I was stunned when I realized one of the clients, a woman, was very fluent in four different languages (Greek, English, French, Spanish).

I couldn't help but think that if only it wasn't just food that was provided but also the provision of support to push these individuals (clients) to maximize their potentials.

Volunteering at the foodbank has taught me not to be wasteful with food because someone somewhere may also need it.

Coming from Ghana, I have made it a life goal to start a campaign in Ghana where food will not be allowed to expire but rather be given to those who really need it. As humans.

I don't have the means to feed every person that needs food but I will never be comfortable knowing that someone is hungry while I am satisfied.

Let's shift perceptions. Those in poverty are not a drain on society, costing taxpayers, but they have the potential as producers, societal assets, not liabilities. Their skills can move our economy forward. They will spend the money they earn.

I challenge us to adopt a guaranteed annual income so citizens can live their lives with dignity. We need to ensure equal opportunities to education, healthy foods, housing and water, in the south, in the north, in urban and rural areas. Let's give hope for tomorrow.

Colleagues, the 1970 Special Senate Committee on Poverty released a report addressing the situation of Canada's poor, recommending a guaranteed annual income in the form of a negative income tax. Not viewed as a panacea for all society's problems, guaranteed income was viewed a game-changer. That report, emphasizing the working poor, detailed issues which, alas, still exist today and have worsened. Its words still hold true:

On economic grounds there is a powerful case for enabling the poor to stand on their own feet. On humanitarian grounds, the case for action is compelling, especially in the case of those who are unlikely ever to be able to fend for themselves. The intangible and immeasurable factors of human well-being, social betterment, and communal harmony are in themselves reasons to push ahead. . . Whether they will receive it is a test of the sincerity with which Canadians hold the ideals they profess.

Remember, a key issue leading to the 1919 Winnipeg strike was a living wage. Wouldn't it be wonderful, finally, to reach that goal of 98 years ago and the vision of the argument of 50 years ago and honour all our citizens, immigrants and refugees with the dignity they deserve.

Senators, we are all better off when we are all better off. Thank you.

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