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FAST FACTS

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Putting the spirit of giving in context

Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary. Martin Luther King Jr.

Canadians are incredibly generous. According to the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, almost 23 million Canadians – 84% of the population aged 15 and over – made a financial donation to a charitable or other nonprofit organization in 2007.

This spirit of giving is most notable during the Christmas season. In Manitoba, charities such as the Christmas Cheer Board, Winnipeg Harvest, Siloam Mission and the Salvation Army scale up their campaigns in the fall and their pleas for help are met with enthusiastic support. Generous Manitobans donate hundreds of thousands of dollars that effectively keep these organizations, and the people they serve, afloat all year long.

And the support is much needed. Winnipeg Harvest reports that the number of people relying on food banks increased by 21% between September 2008 and September 2009. They provide food to over 40,000 individuals each month. Like food banks across Canada, Winnipeg Harvest has become a permanent fixture in the mix of institutions serving those struggling to survive

between pay cheques. But food banks have not always been part of our landscape. They began to spring up across the country in 1981, when “fiscal constraint” became the mantra of governments in Britain, the U.S. and Canada. Governments began to cutback on social spending thereby unraveling a social safety net that while far from perfect, helped people meet their basic needs. Ironically, the social safety net developed in response to public outrage that people were forced to stand in soup lines during the Great Depression.

Nonetheless, the political landscape shifted in the late 1970’s and the community responded by opening food banks to help families who began falling through the cracks.

Since that time, income insecurity has increased significantly and there has been a doubling of the use of food banks since the Canadian Food Bank Association began keeping track in 1989. However, those involved in the early food bank movement never intended to be “in business” this long. They actively advocated for improved income security so that people would have the resources to purchase their own food.

In spite of the best of intentions, food banks have become a permanent feature in a society that has become increasingly unjust. Since first writing about food banks in 1986, Graham Riches,



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Director of University of British Columbia School of Social Work and Family Studies, remains concerned that governments are failing to live up to international obligations to “respect, protect and fulfill” the human right to adequate food as outlined in the 1976 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

On one hand, it is difficult to criticize the charity model because the services are so desperately needed. On the other hand, it gives governments the excuse to ignore the economic injustices referred to by Martin Luther King Jr.

Brian Bechtel, Director of Edmonton’s food bank between 1986 and 1989 agrees. *“There is no doubt in my mind that the presence of food banks has allowed governments to feel comfortable cutting social programs closer to the bone. I watched it happen.”*

While the model allows citizens to feel good about giving, the problem never goes away. The troubling reality that hundreds of thousands of Canadians are regularly turning to charities for their survival in a country of great wealth is simply accepted as the way things are.

But it doesn’t have to be this way.

The right to food, argues Riches and other food security activists, is not about handing out free food to people, but is instead about enabling people to buy or grow their own. And at Christmas time, families should not have to rely on the kindness of strangers to provide gifts for their children.

That is why community organizations across the country have been urging governments to implement poverty reduction plans. In Manitoba, CCPA, in collaboration with Make Poverty History Manitoba, released *the view from here: Manitobans call for a poverty reduction plan*. We call upon our governments to set targets and timelines to ensure that we make progress toward the elimination of poverty.

Timelines and targets can be set for any number of indicators. For example, our plan calls

for a commitment to reduce poverty by 25% in five years and 50% within a decade.

Food-bank use is another indicator that we chose, with a commitment to lower its rate by 50% in ten years. Once that target is met, another is set so that incrementally we move towards elimination.

Eighteen per cent of Winnipeg Harvest’s clients are active in the labour market so implementing a living wage is one way of meeting these goals.

Governments of all stripes are hesitant to set targets and timelines because they say that they can’t afford to. If this is so, then they have boxed themselves in that corner because they have gone too far with tax cuts. And citizen complacency, if not enthusiasm for tax cuts, is equally to blame. Reversing this trend would allow us to move away from a charity model toward a collective response to poverty.

Canadians are to be applauded for their generosity. And we should all continue to give. But as Dr. King so wisely observed, we must not overlook the circumstances that require charity. The best gift we can give to the poor is to ensure that they have the means available to fully participate in society. And that means sufficient income to purchase what they need.

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