

Question Period – Ontario Legislature – September 24, 2008

POVERTY

Mr. Michael Prue: My question is for the Premier. Our economy is in a tailspin. People are losing jobs, welfare rates are soaring, evictions from housing are up and food banks cannot keep up with the demand. Your response, as the leader of this province, has been to tell Ontarians that we need to go slow in addressing poverty, that we can't afford to fully tackle poverty at this time.

Several people living in poverty—Cheryl Duggan, Sharon McPherson, Ken MacLeod and Josephine Grey—are with us today in the gallery. Would the Premier please tell Cheryl, Ken, Sharon and Josephine why the implementation of a poverty strategy is no longer a priority of your government?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this issue, but I can't agree with the premise of my colleague's question. I'm proud to lead the first Ontario government which is making a deliberate and determined effort to reduce poverty, to measure poverty, to reduce it in a measurable way, and to do that by means of a focused strategy. The issue is not whether we do this; the issue is how quickly can we move on this. But we've done many other things in the interim, and I look forward to speaking to those in response to the supplemental questions.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Mr. Michael Prue: The Premier talks about a plan with no resources. The Premier's view is that nothing can or should be done to address poverty during economic downturns, and that flies in the face of experts and the lessons of history. Virtually every government in this province, save and except one in the 1995 period, did exactly what we think you should be doing, and that is increase spending on social programs to make sure that the most vulnerable do not fall into the vicious cycle of poverty.

On this side we believe that governments have a moral and economic responsibility to help the vulnerable in difficult times. Has this government assessed the cost of social services, health care and the justice system that will be incurred if your government does not fully move ahead with poverty reduction?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: My colleague makes a very good point, and I hope more and more of us, and Ontarians more broadly speaking, come to understand the connection between poverty, our failure to properly address that and the costs that will be incurred in other areas of government expenditures. He's absolutely right on that score. That's why we put in place an Ontario child benefit, with monthly benefits now flowing to families, supporting 1.3 million kids. That's why we've increased the minimum wage time and time

again. It's why we've increased social assistance after it was frozen for so many years. It's why we're investing in affordable housing, a new dental program and enhancing our student nutrition program in our schools. We've doubled the funding for that. We understand it. We get the connection between investing in poverty and the corresponding reductions and expenditures elsewhere, and that's one of the things in part that has motivated us to keep doing these kinds of things.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Final supplementary?

Mr. Michael Prue: Since the Premier did not adequately answer the question about the cost of poverty, I'll try to give him some help. A 2007 report by a leading US economist found that the impact of child poverty in the United States costs that country \$500 billion a year. If you use the math and figure the number of people in Ontario, that would translate to about \$22 billion a year.

Would the Premier please explain why he is backing off on addressing poverty when doing so could reasonably be expected to cost this province \$22 billion in an already faltering Ontario economy?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: Again, I accept the premise of this particular question, which is that it's a matter of enlightened self-interest, both for our personal sake and the sake of our economy, that we find more ways, working together, to support families that are struggling in poverty.

There's something that I like to think is exciting taking place in the province of Ontario. It's being led by Minister Deb Matthews. We've been consulting Ontarians. At the end of this year, we want to put out a plan, the first of its kind in Ontario's history, that properly defines poverty, puts in place specific ways to measure it, puts in place specific targets, and puts in place a specific strategy for us to achieve those targets, together with regular accountability so people will know whether we're making success or not. That has never happened before. We're prepared to take this on. We understand there are some challenges associated with the economy, but we will move forward on this issue.

POVERTY

Mr. Michael Prue: Again, back to the Premier. This government has said that it wants to hear from Ontarians about poverty. In fact, you held some roundtables across the province. You invited people to participate in those roundtables, or to submit letters and respond to your website survey. Thousands of Ontarians have made a great effort to have their voices heard. They trusted that you would take their views seriously. In fact, in the last election you promised to take it seriously and have a report within one year of that election. Why will you not commit today to release your comprehensive report on what you have heard-so many Ontarians know their views-and have taken into account in your scaled-back poverty plan?

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): To the Minister of Children and Youth Services.

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I want to take this opportunity to thank the thousands and thousands of people across this province who participated in this poverty reduction consultation. From one end of the province to the other, people living in poverty, people in the business community and the faith communities and social services-the whole province got together and started talking about solutions. I want to take this opportunity to say thank you to the members from all sides of the House who convened groups in their ridings to start to talk constructively about poverty reduction. It has been an extraordinary process. We are working very hard to meet the deadline and to report back by the end of the year.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary.

Mr. Michael Prue: Back to the minister: I have a difficult time understanding why this government refuses to publicly report on what they have heard from Ontarians about poverty. You promised it within a year, and now you're talking about the end of the year and possibly next year. Perhaps the plan does not address most of Ontarians' concerns. You cannot hide this from Ontarians. Poverty Watch Ontario has reported on government and community consultations. The 25 in 5: Network for Poverty Reduction-145 organizations-has issued a report. And today we have filed our own report in the timeline that we promised to do: when the Legislature returned. We listened to over 400 people. All of these reports call for the same things: a poverty-proof minimum wage, social assistance rates that cover basic needs, and an adequate supply of affordable housing. Why won't this government listen to the voices of low-income people and move ahead now?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I have to say I am a bit confused. Our commitment was to report by the end of the year and we are on track to do that. As I said, we have heard from thousands of people. We have reviewed hundreds of submissions. We are working very hard to actually develop the strategy that will be complete by the end of the year. I look forward to a fulsome discussion at that time.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Final supplementary.

Mr. Michael Prue: This government has resources and should have done this a long time ago. If our little party can do it, then you should be able to do it with the legion of people that work for you. Ontarians are demanding the following: a minimum wage of \$10.25 an hour-now. They are demanding a full Ontario child benefit-now. They are demanding an expert committee to ensure that social assistance rates cover basic costs of living-now. They are demanding a commitment of 7,000 new units of affordable housing a year-now. Why won't this government admit that inaction solves nothing, and go forward with these plans immediately? The people are hungry. The people are in need.

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I think it's only fair to acknowledge that actually developing a

comprehensive poverty reduction strategy is much more than just compiling a list of suggestions that people have made. We are working very hard to create a fair, balanced and aggressive-but doable-poverty reduction strategy that will create opportunities for people, that will break the cycle of poverty, that will make sure that every child in this province has the opportunity to be the very best they can be regardless of the income of their parents.

CHILD POVERTY

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My question is for the Premier. When 12.6% of Ontario's children-345,000 of our youngsters-live below the poverty line, when child poverty has increased 2.3% over the past five years in good economic times in this province, how is it that the McGuinty government can abandon the issue of child poverty reduction?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: To the Minister of Children and Youth Services.

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I would just say I'm a bit nonplussed by this question given that this past July the first Ontario child benefit cheques started to be delivered to families across the province. It's a benefit of \$600 per child per family, and that's going to grow until it reaches \$1,100 per child per year.

We are making a measurable difference in child poverty right now, but we are saying that's not enough. That is why we are developing a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy that will ensure every child has the opportunity to be the very best they can be.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Back to the Premier: This government knows darned well that their child benefit does not replace the national child benefit clawback that they took away from kids for so many years, and they've also taken back the back-to-school allowance, as well as the winter clothing allowance. You know darned well that families are suffering as a result of the failed policies of this government.

We had ministers trotting around the province all summer long pretending that there's a plan in the works, that it's imminent, that child poverty reduction is going to be coming soon and that these stakeholders that they've been talking to are going to see a real plan be implemented. Here today we know that that's not the case. How is it that this government can now turn to the plea of their own poverty and go back on the fight on child poverty that they were committed to for so many years? It's all just a sham, and this government knows very well that they're not doing what they need to do to take care of those 345,000 children living in poverty, whose futures are being devastated by this government.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Minister?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I'm going to take this opportunity to talk a little bit about the Ontario child benefit. I think it's very important that every member of this House understand that the Ontario child benefit is different from anything we've ever done in Ontario, because for the first time we are supporting families where the parents work. For the first time, families who are working very hard to support their kids are getting a little bit more than they would have had before. But we're not turning our back on social assistance, and I think it's very important that the member opposite actually get her facts right. A single mom, for example, with two kids, on social assistance has had an increase in income of 27% since we were elected. That's made up of the end of the clawback to the NCBS, increases in social assistance, federal investments that were not clawed back. We've made important strides, but we have still got work to do, and that is in fact why we are developing the strategy.

EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS

Mr. Paul Miller: My question is to the Premier. Since July 2004, Statistics Canada reported that Ontario has lost 235,000 manufacturing jobs and almost 45,000 direct and indirect forestry jobs. Because of EI cuts by the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government of the mid-1990s, many of these unemployed workers do not qualify for EI and are ending up on Ontario Works rolls, living far below the poverty line.

Will the Premier admit that his economic policies have failed to protect good-paying manufacturing jobs in this province and that the economic devastation of the McGuinty years is resulting in rising poverty rates in Ontario's manufacturing and resource communities?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: To the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Dwight Duncan: This government has worked actively to assist those families and workers in the sectors that are challenged and we will continue to make those investments, whether it's investments in skills training, which you, sir, voted against; whether or not it's incentives to encourage investment to create jobs, which you, sir, voted against.

I would remind the member opposite that in spite of the challenges, particularly in the manufacturing and automotive sector which are very real and very front and centre for this government, we're seeing growth in other sectors. We have seen a net increase in jobs, a net increase in real wages, a 1.7% increase in employment year over year. We recognize the challenges. We're making the investments that are essential to protect families. We do need a federal partner that will address the discrepancy in employment

insurance, and I hope the member will stand up with us for Ontario to ensure fairness for Ontarians.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary.

Mr. Paul Miller: Fine words from the minister-it's too bad your federal cousins don't share your concern. Almost all experts agree that it is the huge increase in qualifying hours brought in by the federal Liberal government in the mid 1990s that is responsible for the fact that in a city such as Toronto, 25% of unemployed qualify for EI benefits-less than 25%. And yet, in the recently released platform, there is not a word about reducing these outrageous qualifying times.

Will the Premier admit that not only have his economic policies failed the people of Ontario, but also that his federal Liberal cousins are as indifferent to the plight of unemployed Ontarians as is he?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: Premier McGuinty has launched a fairness for Ontario initiative. People can go to fairness.ca to see it. There is no question-and our policy is not to be partisan; our policy is to deal with Ontario's challenges.

The member may want to get up and have a partisan debate about this. We want to get up and say to all the federal political parties that it's time to change the employment insurance rules, that an unemployed auto worker in my community should not get \$4,800 a year less than an unemployed worker in other parts of the country.

Sir, we're less interested in the gamesmanship than we are in dealing with the problem. I'd invite you to sign the petition. I'd invite you to ask your federal counterparts to stand up for Ontario, to support our initiative of fairness for all Ontario workers relative to their counterparts in other parts of the country.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Mr. Gilles Bisson: My question is to the Minister of Mines. Minister, you'll know that First Nations are the most impoverished communities in our province and that we need to do something in order to stimulate economic activity to give the people of those communities an opportunity for a better future. Your government currently is going through a process of Mining Act reform consultations, and First Nations are saying to you, as they're saying to me, and as they're saying to our leader, Howard Hampton, that your process is too rushed, that they need the time to consult with their communities to get this right.

My question to you is simply this: Are you prepared to accept the recommendation by Nishnawbe Aski Nation to give them the necessary time to consult their communities so we can get this right?

Hon. Michael Gravelle: I appreciate the question. It's somewhat ironic coming from a party whose leader said this summer that there was no need for consultations whatsoever. It was an extraordinary quote to hear, and you and I have discussed that ourselves, I say to the member from Timmins-James Bay.

Having said that, we take the consultation process extremely seriously. We're working very closely with our First Nation partners. We're doing very targeted consultations with each community. In fact, we've got community consultations that are going on as we speak, and we're trying to organize getting them together. We are working with not just NAN but with Matawa and other organizations to try and meet their needs in terms of the consultation process. We take it very, very seriously; it's something that obviously we do and perhaps your party doesn't, once again in light of the fact that your leader made it clear he didn't think consultations were necessary in the first place. Regardless, we're working closely with them, and we will continue that. We look for their advice.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: Well, Minister, you're not working closely with them, because they're calling me and others to say that you're trying to rush them through a process of consultation that is designed by Queen's Park, by the bureaucrats, that basically doesn't take into account what the realities are in First Nations communities. These are impoverished communities. These are communities where people are struggling to make ends meet. These are fly-in communities; we don't have roads. These are communities where most people don't have computers because they cannot afford to buy one or get the Internet in their community. So they're saying that you're trying to rush them down a path of consultation that in the end will not give them the opportunity to do what needs to be done.

I ask you again: Are you going to take the time to make this right as far as consultation? Or are you going to force them through a process that at the end of the day is just going to lead to more conflict and the slowing down of projects in their communities?

Hon. Michael Gravelle: Again, I ask the member whether or not that's the position of your party in light of what Mr. Hampton said earlier.

What I can tell you is that I certainly have been working closely with the First Nations in this regard. I'm very aware of the fact that they also are looking for clarity and certainty. We are working very closely trying to provide the consultation environment that they're looking for.

We spent a significant amount of time before the consultations began this summer, in our consultation document we put forward about a year and a half ago, on making the conditions absolutely the way that they should be. Indeed, we are going to continue to work with our First Nation partners on this. We know that the consultation process is very important. We very much want to meet our duty to consult, and the fact is we will continue our consultation process but recognizing that both the mining sector and the First Nations have made it clear to me that they need clarity and certainty. It's important that whatever changes go through, the legislation happens relatively soon.

CHILD CARE

Mr. Paul Miller: My question is to the Minister of Community and Social Services. As the minister is well aware, low-income grandparents raising their grandchildren have been cut off from the little assistance they receive through the ministry's Ontario Works temporary care assistance plan.

Back on June 9, the minister said, "This temporary care assistance is short-term. It says so; it's temporary care assistance." I have news for the minister: It doesn't say so. Her ministry policy directives read: "Assistance is intended to be available to children under 18 for as long as they require care ... no time limits are set out in the availability of temporary care assistance." When will this minister get with the program and enforce her own rules?

Hon. Madeleine Meilleur: I appreciate the question. The member of the third party is a very strong supporter and defender of these grandparents. I take this opportunity to thank them for the good service that they are offering.

These grandparents believe that they have a responsibility towards their grandchildren who are in a situation where they need protection. That's why we have this temporary care assistance program, which provides grandparents with financial support. This has nothing to do with the financial capacity of the grandparents. It's a program that has been in existence for quite some time. As part of this poverty review, we will also review this program.