

Poverty struggles to get a place on government agenda

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OTTAWA (CUP) - The Christmas lights are being strung up this week on Parliament Hill and winter is well on its way. Inside the House of Commons many politicians are focusing on possible holiday presents like tax cuts and imminent vacations.

But as the frost takes hold in the capital, many activists are concerned that after a year of calling for more attention to poverty issues, the federal Liberals just don't seem to be getting the message.

The latest, and perhaps most sobering, call for action comes from the Campaign 2000 coalition, an umbrella group of 70 organizations across Canada. The coalition was originally formed 10 years ago to help bring an end to child poverty by the end of 1999, and to keep an eye on Ottawa after it pledged to eliminate child poverty.

"In 1989 there was a mixture of pragmatism and hope," says Ed Broadbent, the former federal New Democratic Party leader and the politician who originally tabled a motion in the House calling for the eradication of child poverty by the year 2000.

"The pragmatism was based on the fact

that a number of countries had already virtually eliminated child poverty," he tells a packed room of national media upon the release of the Campaign 2000 report.

"It was desirable and doable. They were able to do it over a longer term, 10 years, rather than a shorter-term period. As well, having all parties agree it would get the right attention it deserved."

The coalition's report card for the government outlines some grave problems facing Canada's poorest people.

According to Campaign 2000's statistics, one in five children in Canada live in poverty conditions. This has meant an increase of 460,000 children in the past 10 years totaling over 1.4 million children living in poverty across the country.

In Ontario the child poverty rate has increased by 118 per cent in the last decade. British Columbia has the next highest increase at 78 per cent. Saskatchewan was the only province to have shown a decrease.

Newfoundland and Nova Scotia have the highest rates of child poverty overall. Almost 23 per cent of the provinces' children live in poverty situations.

But outside of the list of numbers, the

report's collaborators outline additional facts about child poverty.

"Aboriginal, visible minority and children with disabilities are more likely to be found in low income families," said Laurel Rothman of Campaign 2000. "Forty per cent of food bank users are children even though less than 26 per cent of the population is children."

The group says the federal government must spend \$16-billion over the next five years - a quarter of the estimated budget surplus over the period - to address child poverty adequately. Government figures predict a budget surplus of \$60- to \$90-billion over the next five years.

In particular, the coalition is calling for \$1-billion for social housing, a freeze in post-secondary education tuition fees and \$4-billion toward early childhood development initiatives such as child care and family resources.

But despite the daunting figures, it remains to be seen whether or not the federal government is listening.

A major report released last year outlined the crisis facing Canada's homeless population.

Authored by Ann Golden, the chair of a

national task force on homelessness and the director of the Toronto United Way, the report comprised a comprehensive list of recommendations to all levels of government on how to address homelessness in Canada.

The major recommendation of the report was a call for more money to public housing - both to refurbish existing housing and to construct new housing.

The report was the catalyst for many city councils to declare homelessness a national disaster, and brought about the appointment of federal Labour Minister Claudette Bradshaw to co-ordinate the government's initiatives to deal with homelessness.

But despite a national fact-finding mission this past summer, many now say Bradshaw hasn't delivered any tangible results as the homeless face another brutal Canadian winter.

"First of all, we haven't seen anything and that's part of the problem," said Libby Davies, the NDP's child, youth, homelessness and social program critic.

"Claudette Bradshaw was appointed in March and we haven't seen any new housing built, we haven't seen any strategy laid out with a commitment from the federal government.

They have to disclose what they're going to do."

Davies has become one of Bradshaw's most vocal critics in the house. Both politicians have extensive knowledge of poverty issues, but from different backgrounds.

Bradshaw worked for over 30 years as a social worker in New Brunswick prior to becoming a federal politician. Davies, meanwhile, represents Vancouver's Downtown Eastside - the lowest income urban community in Canada. She has allied herself with activist groups including the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and Homes not Bombs.

Davies points to examples like the now infamous images of homeless activists being recently pepper-sprayed by police while protesting on Parliament Hill to show the government's lack of concern over dealing with poverty directly.

"They're very good at coming up with window dressing and saying 'oh well, we're very concerned about this' and then put a little money up and we've solved the problem," says Davies.

"Well, we're not going to solve this

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