

Timely advice for next premier

Mike Harris left an odd election gift for his successor. In his final weeks as premier, he set up a panel to rethink the role of government. He appointed distinguished Ontarians to look into everything from social policy to urban affairs.

Now, a year and a half after his retirement, the results are coming in.

They're not what Harris, who was seeking ways to shrink the public sector, had in mind. Nor are they good news for Premier Ernie Eves, who is struggling to hide a ballooning deficit.

Economist Judith Maxwell, who prepared the government's paper on social policy, has just released her findings. Her conclusion: Ontario is underinvesting in its citizens and putting its future productivity at risk.

Maxwell, who heads Canadian Policy Research Networks, an Ottawa think tank, argues that Ontario has undergone a profound social transformation in the last 25 years. New family patterns have emerged. The nature of work has changed. The province has become highly urbanized and economically polarized.

But rather than confronting these new realities, the provincial Tories have focused solely on short-term efficiency. They have cut spending, cut taxes and offloaded government responsibilities onto families, markets and communities.

"This programming may be costing taxpayers less," she allows. "But citizens have been left without access to the shared services they need to manage their daily patterns of family and work life."

If Ontario stays on the current track, Maxwell warns, an ever-growing number of its citizens will be marginalized. This is a waste of talent that a province with an aging workforce cannot afford.

Moreover, she predicts, the tension between work and caregiving will become intolerable for many families as the baby boomers enter their declining years.



Carol Goar

Maxwell's 26-page paper, *The Great Social Transformation: Implications For The Social Role Of Government In Ontario*, (available at www.cprn.org) does a better job of spelling out the challenges the province faces than offering prescriptions.

She makes only two specific policy recommendations.

The first is that Ontario's next government invest immediately in early childhood services. This will free parents to participate fully in the workforce and allow preschoolers to get the strongest possible start in life.

It is simply not realistic to assume that families in the 21st century can live on a single income, she says. Nor is it fair to deprive children from disadvantaged backgrounds of the stimulation they need to keep pace with their peers.

Her second suggestion is that Queen's Park design programs to make work pay. Thousands of Ontarians with full-time jobs are living below the poverty line. (The current minimum wage of \$6.85 per hour works out to an annual income of \$14,248. Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off for a family of three, living in a large urban centre is \$28,000.)

Workers who can't support their families, upgrade their skills or improve their children's life chances have little incentive to be more productive or committed to their employers, Maxwell maintains.

These proposals aren't meant to be exhaustive. What Maxwell is trying to show is that, when governments ignore social change or force individuals to

fend for themselves - she calls this "the individualization of risk" - they jeopardize the well-being of their citizens and the long-term health of the economy.

She does not advocate a return to the '60s, when governments borrowed freely to finance expensive social policy experiments. Rather, she calls on policymakers to review the distribution of responsibilities among the state, the market, the community and the family and fix what isn't working.

Widespread homelessness, for example, suggests that the market isn't the right vehicle to meet the need for low-income housing.

Rising skill requirements for almost all jobs suggest that the private sector ought to be more involved in worker training.

The exhaustion many women are feeling as they struggle to earn an income, look after their children and care for aging parents suggests that families are being asked to do too much.

"The great social transformation of recent decades has profoundly altered the needs of Canadians and will continue to do so," Maxwell says. Yet social policy Ontario has not kept pace with these evolving needs. It is still falling short."

This is bad news for any prospective premier. But it is especially inconvenient for Eves, who is heading to the polls with the Harris government's record to defend and no plans to address Ontario's shortage of affordable child care or raise the minimum wage.

Even if the Premier wanted to adopt a more progressive stance, it would be impossible given the bills he has run up and the tax cuts he is promising.

Maxwell did not set out to embarrass the Tories. Her aim was to offer the best advice she could to Ontario's next premier.

Eves can thank Harris for what promises to be a lively election debate.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.