Ontario Needs Policies For New Social Reality

A dated social policy, based on 30 year-old assumptions, hurts Ontario's workforce, its economy and its aging citizens. The province needs a "new logic" that fits government action to the actual patterns of its citizens' lives today.

That's the advice CPRN's President, Judith Maxwell, gave to the Panel on the Role of Government, and outlines in a paper released today. In ***The Great Social Transformation: Implications for the Social Role of Government in Ontario***, Maxwell describes the tremendous changes in Ontario society over the past thirty years. Those changes that have rendered social policies designed in the 1950s and '60s inappropriate to the way Ontarians live today.

"Changes in the shape of our families, our work habits, our community life and in the roles markets and governments play have all shaken the assumptions of the post-war era," Maxwell says.

Maxwell argues that the post-war social contract was based on two core assumptions – families with a single breadwinner, and a full employment economy promising life-long jobs with a single employer. By contrast, today's work experience involves several employers and a need for continual upgrading of skills. Families, on the other hand, now rely on the incomes of both parents, and even then two incomes may not be enough to raise a family above the poverty line.

These changes, in turn, have enormous implications for caregiving at both ends of the life-cycle, for children and aging adults. Add to all this the reality of a far more diverse society, and the implications for social policy are both obvious and challenging in their complexity.

"As governments have retrenched and reliance on markets has grown, families and individuals have been exposed to more risk," says Maxwell. "At the same time, the systems for sharing risk have been weakened, or have not adapted to changing circumstances."

"We need to re-examine our expectations of individuals, families, communities, markets and government in the light of the great social transformation of the past three decades. We need to find the right ideas for a healthy society in the future."

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Maxwell reviews new ideas emerging in three areas of public policy, in particular:

- families with children;
- adults earning low wages; and,
- ageing Canadians.

She finds that these new ideas "*all require social investments which will generate higher rates of productivity growth in the future*" – in early childhood services, in compensation for low-paid jobs and in social supports for elderly and disabled people.

"When baby boomers reach their "older elderly" years, their needs will only be met if society can produce rising living standards at a time of slower growth in the labour force," Maxwell says.

"This requires investment, today, in children, youth, and young families to the point where they can be effective in their work, family and civil society roles. This reciprocity between young and old is fundamental to the well-being of Ontario citizens in the coming decades."

You can access or download a copy of the report by clicking here.

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