A New Vision For Canada's Social Policy

Friday, September 10, 2004 – A major report from Canadian Policy Research Networks proposes a fundamental redesign of what it calls our "social architecture" – the ways and means by which we respond to social risks.

Canada's New Social Risks: Directions for a New Social Architecture, by Jane Jenson, former Director of CPRN's Family Network and Canada Research Chair in Citizenship and Governance at the Université de Montréal, is the final report in a series of papers by Canadian and international scholars that set the stage for a contemporary blueprint for social policy.

Why now? A coherent vision informed Canada's social policies in the post-war period. There was a balance of roles and responsibilities among the four sources of social well-being – the market, the state, families and communities – that was appropriate to the social risks of the time and that reflected social values. The years since have seen enormous social and economic change. The post-war vision no longer fits current realities.

Those realities have overturned the idea of typical homes, families and workplaces implicit in social programs set in place in the '40s, '50s and '60s. Since 1945:

- Birth rates have fallen by more than half.
- The proportion of women in the labour force has tripled.
- The incidence of lone-parent families has almost tripled.
- Divorces have increased by a factor of 6.
- The share of the population over age 65 has increased by 60%.
- The share of immigrants from Europe or the United States has fallen from 94% to 22%.
- The share of Aboriginal people in the population has tripled.

Bringing our social architecture up to date is essential. Failure to get the social policy regime right imposes significant costs on the economy. Good social policy is a productive factor, and key to a country's success in the global economy.

The changes of the past 50 years have shifted the balance of responsibilities among the four sources of well-being. They leave new social risks in their wake that must be addressed, like:

- *Rising income inequality* – government taxes and transfers doing less than in the past to even income distribution.
- *A labour market polarized* by globalization into high paid knowledge work and low-paid service work, with impacts on health and other forms of well-being.

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- *People may be poor even when employed*. Rising participation in employment, but also growth of precarious work, paying inadequate wages.
- *An ageing society and increased lone-parent and two-earner households* leave families unable to provide children and vulnerable adults the care provided in the past.
- *Difficulties in achieving social inclusion* for immigrants and visible minorities, barriers to economic and social integration.
- *Challenges to the advancement of Aboriginal peoples*.

These risks, the increasing reliance on the market to deliver well-being in areas like housing and services, and the fiscal retrenchment of the state of the last decade have all fostered a social architecture that places too great a burden on families and fails to respond effectively to these new risks.

"Canadians want a "working society" where each person can contribute. But that can't happen without supports like early childhood education and care, and access to post-secondary education," says Jenson. "And it can't happen without jobs that pay a living wage."

"We need to rebalance the distribution of responsibilities among market, state, family and community."

After describing a set of "visioning principles", Jenson suggests four new directions for an improved social architecture:

- *Income and Services:* The state sector needs to add effective investments in services for low, modest and middle income Canadians to its current focus on supplementing the income of low-wage workers and their families;

- *Fill the Gaps:* Use the powers of the state and community sectors to fill the gaps in the systems of care for both children and elderly;

- *Living Wage:* Rebalance responsibilities within the market and family sectors by encouraging more employers to take responsibility for the well-being of their workers; and

- *Towards Autonomy*: Ensure Aboriginal communities and families can move from dependency to autonomy by strengthening community capacity and family resiliency, in addition to providing resources from the state sector.

Finally, the report underlines the importance of attention to governance. A new social architecture will require a consensus among different levels of government, business, community and family sectors on the need for and direction of change.

"That, in turn, will demand effective leadership around a shared vision of how to achieve well-being and an institutional locus where policy learning can take place," says Jenson. "It's a challenge for a federal system like ours, but if the countries of the European Union can succeed at it, why shouldn't we?"

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