

Commentary

It was very interesting to read Sue Rickards article in the *Telegraph Journal* on the Act that will be in front of the Legislature to create a brand new Crown Corporation to administer the Provincial Poverty Reduction Plan.

Ms. Rickards states that people living in poverty should not be considered as liabilities but as assets. She goes on to say that they should no longer be victims of misplaced institutional charity. Strong corporate language: "liabilities and assets!". For me, people who are living in poverty are, first and foremost, human beings. They are also New Brunswickers and full-fledged citizens who have every right to be treated as such. They are living in poverty because of specific circumstances such as low wages, health problems, inadequate employment insurance, living on fixed income, having experienced teen pregnancies, etc. They should certainly not be considered as numbers in a corporate balance sheet.

The article goes on to suggest that the way to deal with poverty is to put it in the hands of the communities, to return to our community roots. Sorry, but I would point out that before Louis Robichaud's Equal Opportunity Program, poverty was in the hands of communities, this was not working. As a society, we made the decision to put some public programs in place to deal with broad issues (health, education, poverty, unemployment, etc.). Such issues cannot be dealt with by relying on charity. These public programs have the advantage of being accessible to everyone, wherever they reside and everyone is treated equally.

This brings me to a third point in the article. The delivery of the Poverty Reduction Plan will be done by Community Inclusion Networks. These networks could be as many as 15, and they would cover all of NB. The Networks would give equal services to everyone, as public programs do, and they start at the same time everywhere.

From Ms Rickards, a key member of the transition team, we now learn that it will be up to each Network to determine local priorities of action. So, in reality, instead of having a program that is available, as well as similar for everyone, we could now have 15 different programs. Is that not returning to the pre-Robichaud era, where 15 counties were administering social assistance with the negatives consequences we all know, one of which was the difference in the help offered, depending if you were living in a rich county compared to a poor one. Remember, at the beginning of this process, one of the arguments put forth was that poverty reduction had not been achieved because government departments were working in silos. Now, our new modern-age social thinkers have found the solution. We need more silos! So they have in fact created 15 more silos and, it could go up to 20 if one reads the proposed legislation.

We also learned that these Networks will have various sources of funding. No use relying, like in the old days, only on our tax dollars to fund programs. Now, monies could come from private corporations, charities and other external sources. Does this mean

that Networks in affluent areas will have more money than those in less affluent areas? What does this say for equal chances of access?

Through Ms Rickards, we also learn that not all communities have the capacities to put in place these Networks. Are we to understand that people living in poverty in urban areas, where there are more community organizations, will be able to access programs while those living elsewhere, mainly rural one, will not? Is this the new and improved improved version for attacking poverty? To target areas where you have resources and to leave others to fight by themselves?

One aspect that is not mentioned at all in the article is the question of service in the language of choice. This new Crown Corporation will certainly fall under the provincial language act, meaning that citizens anywhere in the province can be served in the language of their choice. This is a right. Now, how is this basic fundamental right going to be administered by these new networks? We all know that right now, the majority of community organizations don't have the capacity to give service in both official languages. How are the hired staff and the volunteers in the different areas of the province going to fulfill this legal obligation?

Finally, the new Crown Corporation will operate at arms-length from government but all of its 22 members will be nominated by government. This Board will be responsible to administer the funds going to the Networks. It will be interesting to monitor the political lobbying that will be going on in order to get the right person on the Board and on the Networks, so as to be in a better position to get the money. We have in fact politicized the allocation of funds which will deal with poverty reduction.

From Ms. Rickards' point of view, we are breaking new grounds. I certainly don't think so. We are in fact creating an administrative monster that will devour funds but will not help reduce poverty significantly. We are creating 15 new small administrative kingdoms that will answer to themselves and deliver programs as they see fit. We are creating differences in program accessibility, depending on the region you live in and we have politicized the allocation of funds. We are creating a new system which is no longer based upon the principles of accessibility, equality, consistency and universality but one which could, instead, be based on privileges rather than rights.

Is this going to put more food on the table for the vast majority of New Brunswickers living in poverty? No.

Jean-Claude Basque

Moncton, NB

389-1578