

Equal Opportunities Program under attack

Commentary by Ysabel Provencher, PhD, Université Laval

Some individuals involved in the implementation of *Overcoming Poverty Together* assert that their plan will put an end to the devastating effects of the *Equal Opportunity Program* put in place by the provincial government in the 60s. It is our wish to contribute to the debate by pointing out that on the contrary, the *Equal Opportunity Program* made it possible for New Brunswick: a) to forge its role as a provincial authority, and b) to fulfill what continues to be its mission to this day: supporting and stimulating the province's economic and social development.

Not only did the *Equal Opportunity Program* give rise to a centralized wealth distribution system, it also made it possible for the citizens of the province to take advantage of then ever-increasing transfer payments from Ottawa to the provinces, and to institute a number of Federal programs for social and social development (ARDA, Canada Assistance Plan, Unemployment Insurance, etc.) especially needed in the more remote areas. Before that program was put in place, governance of the province was articulated around county administrations, and this made it impossible for provincial public authorities to coordinate economic and social development policies. The *Equal Opportunity Program* enabled the passage of the Municipalities Act and the overhaul of a tax-collecting structure that dated back to colonial times. The program allowed the province to at last take over the planning of its own economic and social development.

The proponents mentioned above would have us believe that during the period that preceded New Brunswick's participation in the *Canada Assistance Plan*, community members were able to really take care of vulnerable people, because responsibility for social assistance was under the authority of towns and parishes. According to these people, the *Equal Opportunity Program* put an end to charity and solidarity within communities. On this point, we feel that it is important to recall a few practices that were in fact used by communities to provide assistance to or care for vulnerable persons, before the adoption of provincial social assistance legislation and other public assistance policies, which stemmed from the *Equal Opportunity Program*.

Before the *Equal Opportunity Program* came into force, New Brunswick's taxation scheme was based on variable rates that were determined according to local capacities, and left municipalities to bear the entire burden of responsibility for educational, social, and health services. In concrete terms, the main social assistance management system in New Brunswick was the Paupers Auction; they served that purpose until the end of the 19th century in English-speaking counties, and as late as 1921 in French-speaking counties, when Federal legislation on public assistance was adopted. For several decades following enactment of this Federal legislation, charity still remained the main mechanism for social assistance, especially in rural areas. Funds raised through charity were used for the upkeep of poorhouses that provided shelter for the communities' destitute seniors, the disabled, and orphans. But charity had its limits, set by the citizens' and each municipality's capacity to give. Until 1937, in urbanized areas, community assistance to the needy took the form of a municipally sponsored *Work for Relief Program*, whereby an individual receiving financial assistance from a town or city agreed to subtract the amount of assistance from their future municipal paycheques. Furthermore, while the province ran a number of charitable homes throughout the jurisdiction, mothers living in poverty were denied any form of allowance.

By introducing uniform property taxes and increasing the provincial sales tax (dubbed social services and education tax), the *Equal Opportunities Program* provided access to basic levels of services in education, social services and health – including access to financial aid – to all citizens of the province, no matter where they lived.

Today *Overcoming Poverty Together* proposes to outsource the delivery of part of these public services. But we must remember that when it comes to fighting to eliminate poverty, the provincial government remains the undeniable authority in the mission that the *Equal Opportunities Plan* enabled it to carry out for the first time.

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