

Economic Divide Needs Bridging

By

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A number of years ago Canada's population was sparse and good agricultural land seemed abundant. Canada was one of the world's most productive bread baskets. After the Second World War, the idea of the middle class moving toward the "good life" emerged as a vision shared by our citizens.

Today, we still have a large middle class but with greater inequalities than previously. Those in charge of working conditions and levels of pay – let's call them the *elite* – now have more political and practical power over the working middle class. The elite compose a small percentage of our population and have managed to consolidate their power and influence. Over time, they have gained a disproportionate share of Canada's wealth, resources, government control, and political influence. This new reality raises new ethical issues.

Divisions within the new middle class are becoming more apparent in terms of life styles. The most economically successful members can afford to send their children to private schools and educate them in universities that offer the best preparation for jobs which hold out some promise that they too may become the elite of the next generation. Those at the bottom level of the middle class have not fared so well. They are stressed about earning enough money to buy a house or pay rent, paying off debts, funding retirement, sending their children to university, or paying medical bills not covered by our public health system. So the lower middle class becomes more separated from the upper middle class than it used to be.

A further indicator of economic disparity can be seen in the food, or lack of food, that Canadians consume. According to Hunger Count 2012, the annual report by Food Banks Canada, more than 800,000 Canadians used food bank assistance last year. In a typical month last year, more than half the recipients lived in Ontario, and nearly half of the 800,000 were children. One in five adults needing assistance had regular jobs that did not provide enough money to pay their bills. About 20% of those in need were from single-parent families.

It is easy to be skeptical about these statistics. At first my own view was one of surprise and disappointment, but the more I look into these figures, the more I am convinced they are not exaggerated. They are, instead, evidence that great inequalities exist in Canada.

In the economic downturn of 2008 the number of food bank users increased by more than 30%. In fact, as many as 13% of food banks temporarily ran out of food at least once in 2012, so the problem of supplying food persists in Canadian society.

Usually, the people needing food are not lazy shiftless Canadians wanting a life-time of free handouts. More typically, they are people working at jobs that do not provide enough money to pay for basic needs such as housing, energy, and food. These costs are increasing annually while wages in many jobs stay the same.

Unfortunately, workers often feel stressed and anxious. They cannot see how things will be better for them in the future. If they do not have adequate pensions they cannot envision a time when they will be able to retire from work. Moreover, in some cases, governments reduce, rather than raise, social assistance.

The **Hunger Count 2012** report makes five recommendations for improvement:

- Increase Federal investment in affordable housing.
- Improve the Guaranteed Income Supplement so that no senior falls below the poverty line.
- At the provincial government level increase the levels of social assistance.
- Establish a Northern Food Security Innovation Fund along with comprehensive school breakfast programs.
- Increase the value and broaden the eligibility of the Working Income Tax Benefit, worker training, and easier access to Employment Insurance Benefits.

But each requires more government funding and none of these is likely to be put in place unless Canadians have the political desire to vote for politicians who will make improvements happen.

So what are the ethical issues that emerge?

First, Canadians need to become aware of growing disparities and hardships. We need to realize that although Canadians are better off than many other citizens we do have increasing inequalities. The golden rule still applies. We need to care and share and think about what is just and fair for all. Many religions and service clubs already share their resources. But now, we need to let our politicians know that governments at all levels ought to help in the battle for fairness and equality.