

Statement on a National Anti-poverty Strategy
September 20, 2010

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is nice to be back here on Parliament Hill debating the issues of the day. One of the very important issues that I have raised here before is the issue of poverty. That was the question that I asked back in the spring session.

We know that poverty has risen with this recession that we have been going through, and continue to go through. By how much? Well, we have not had a lot of information on that, but the Citizens for Public Justice along with their partners released a study back in the spring which indicated that poverty in Canada has gone up from 9.2% to 11.7% overall. That is two and a half percentage points. Child poverty has gone up from 9.5% to 12% as a result of this recession. Those are the numbers. It showed that Employment Insurance and other social measures have failed many Canadians. Social assistance case loads are up. The cost of food is up. The cost of shelter is up. We had the food banks report just less than a year ago showing that food bank usage had gone up 18% in Canada and that the government's response to this has been very weak.

We have no national anti-poverty strategy in Canada. We are one of the few industrialized nations that do not have an anti-poverty strategy. We do have six provinces and one territory now who have an anti-poverty strategy. They all want the same thing. They want the federal government to come to the table and say that it takes poverty seriously.

The United Nations last year in their periodic review made a very specific recommendation; I think it was number 17 that said Canada should have an anti-poverty strategy and that we need to have it. This is the United Nations. Instead of that the government turned around and said, “No, it is not our jurisdiction”. Everybody in the country, from provinces who have these strategies, to social welfare groups, to academics, all understand that it is part of the responsibility of the federal government to step up and have a strategy. We can debate what is in that strategy, but there needs to be a federal anti-poverty strategy here in Canada.

Since that time, in fact, things have only gotten worse. The ridiculous decision to abandon the long form census is going to hurt groups that deal with poverty. It is specifically going to hurt people with disabilities in this country. Organizations like CCD and CACL who deal with people who have disabilities are absolutely bewildered at how the government could possibly cancel the long form census. It is going to have a dramatic impact on the people who are living in poverty and people who have disabilities, many of whom live in poverty. That is the situation we have.

We can talk about the methods that we can use to improve the situation of those living in poverty and also of those who are close to living in poverty such as increasing the Guaranteed Income Supplement, increasing the Child Tax Benefit. There is a great discussion in this country ongoing right now from many people, from all parties represented in Parliament, including the Conservative Party, Senator Hugh Segal, for example, about a basic income for Canadians. What everybody seems to understand except the government is that at the very least what we need to have in Canada is a government that is prepared to say that poverty is an issue; poverty is again on the increase in Canada.

We did a lot to reduce poverty in the late 1990s with the Child Tax Benefit, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and things like that, but we need to reduce poverty in Canada. We all have a role to play in that. Social agencies, provincial governments, municipal governments, everybody from Make Poverty History to the CFIB to the Chamber of Commerce understand that we need to have a national anti-poverty strategy. The question is, why does the federal government not understand that and step forward and say that it will play its role to help those who are living in poverty, especially at time of recession?